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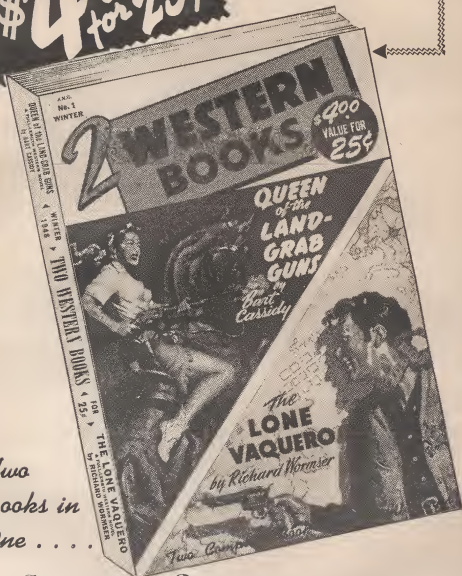
**ETERNAL ZEMMD
MUST DIE!**

"Oh Zemmd-beware the Outcast's
daughter. Beware the Convict from
cold Mercury. These two speak death!"

Novel by **HENRY HASSE**



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TWO THRILLING NOVELS

ETERNAL ZEMMD MUST DIE! By Henry Hasse 2

Lancing out of the void at light speed, it stahhed deep into the Solar System—and vanished. Then began corruption . . . poison and hate creeping from world to world. Too late men learned a death blow had been delivered!

HOSTAGE OF TOMORROW By Robert Abernathy 86

Was Earth on the wrong time-track? Ray Manning stared as nation smashed nation and humans ran in yelping, slaving packs under a sky pulsing with evil energy—and knew the answer lay a hundred years back. Could he return?

SIX FASCINATING STORIES

RUNAWAY By Alfred Coppel, Jr. 31

Ripped by an asteroid stray, the space-ship drifted helplessly . . . until suddenly, across the shuddering deeps, a strange voice called to her.

MOON OF MADNESS By George Whitley 40

Hurling toward that coldly gleaming disc, they thought in terms of thrust and trajectory, deceleration and orbit. They had no time for an old wives' tale.

DWELLERS IN SILENCE By Ray Bradbury 51

A shattered Earth suddenly remembered poor Hathaway, marooned all alone there on Mars by the mad rush homeward. But—was Hathaway alone?

THE STAR BEAST By Damon Knight 59

They called this strange tentacle-headed blob that had floundered into the System Oscar. They were to learn a better name.

LADY INTO HELL-CAT By Stanley Mullen 66

Tracking her across black space-lanes and slapping magnetic bracelets on her was duck soup for S. P. Agent Heydrick. Only then did he learn what a planet-load of trouble he'd bought.

ANIMAT By Basil Wells 77

Batting Venus' slime and the vicious frog-apes, J46 yet found time to wonder: Was he a man or an android?

AND PLANET'S REGULAR FEATURE

THE VIZIGRAPH By The Readers 118

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ETERNAL ZEMMID MUST DIE!

By HENRY HASSE

WE HAVE REMAINED indecisive too long! You must understand this! The future, perhaps the very existence of the Federation hangs in the balance unless we can correlate all that has happened and decide upon a course of action NOW! . . .

DeHarries, Correlator for Earth, paced alone in his suite far beneath the Council Room. He held a sheaf of papers—his intended speech to the Planetary Delegates. Now he crumpled it viciously, flung it to the floor. What good were speeches? Already he anticipated their arguments,



Curt swept the radian. beam with devastating effect.

Lancing out of the void at light-speed, it stabbed deep into the Solar System—and vanished. Then began corruption . . . poison and hate creeping from world to world. Too late men learned a death blow had been delivered!

the protests and questions. He, himself, had a question or two.

"Course of action," he muttered grimly, "What sort of action? Action against what?"

He strode to the immense tele-globe, flicked it on. Its radiant surface reflected the austere Council Chamber above. Already the six delegates were entering. Soon they'd become restless waiting for him. But still DeHarries watched.

Aladdian, Empress of Venus, was there, fragile and lovely despite the grave look

on her alabastrine face. She at least was aware of the threat to the System which had grown apace during the past few years. In Aladdian, DeHarries knew he had an ally to the startling proposal he was going to make. He would need a majority of four. He couldn't count on Mars. The other two votes must come from Mercury, Jupiter, Perlac, or the Callistan colonies.

Leaving his suite by a secret exit, DeHarries stepped into a lift which brought him near the Council Room above.

SIX PAIRS of eyes fastened upon DeHarries, as he stood at the head of the table. He was a striking figure, six-feet-two and white haired, yet with a perpetual tightness of the jaw and a hint of fire in the dark eyes that belied his great age.

"You are wondering why I asked for an Emergency Council, particularly since our Federation has ridden a crest of peace for the past hundred years. Our various governments were never more in accord." He paused for effect, watching the puzzlement grow in their eyes. "Nevertheless, I am convinced that we face the greatest crisis we have ever known! I ask for your fullest co-operation. Any data you can submit—*anything*—may well be a part of the pattern!"

Kraaj, the Jovian emissary, shifted his huge bulk nervously. "Pattern? Pattern for what? You speak in riddles, DeHarries!"

"A pattern so diabolic it's frightening. A pattern I'm convinced is weaving about us all. For example: Earth's complex civilization, atomic-powered industries and commerce, would be irreparably damaged if we were cut off from the Uranium isotope we receive from Mars. You can realize the seriousness when I point out that the annual shipment which should have arrived a month ago—did not arrive."

Jal Tagar of Mars was instantly on his feet, his heavy-lidded eyes blazing. "I submit that my government is blameless! As you well know, the shipment was dispatched as usual! Your own Earth representatives were aboard—"

DeHarries turned a smiling countenance upon Jal Tagar which left the Martian Overlord abashed.

"No accusation has been made," DeHarries said softly, "and none is contemplated. I think we all agree that Mars is blameless."

Aladdian arose to her full height of four-feet-eleven.

"DeHarries is right. We have delayed too long. I have felt that there is a strange force at work among us. As you know, Venus has long held the secret of allotropic metal, which makes any space fleet in-

vulnerable. We have guarded it carefully—" *

She placed tiny fists upon the table. "Yet—our most secret documents, concerning the processing of this metal, have disappeared from the vault in our Royal Laboratories!"

"A matter which need not concern us," growled Rehlek, the Callistan Leader. "Has it not been the Federation policy for each planet to solve its own internal problems?"

"Save where those problems may effect the status of the Federation!" Aladdian countered. "I submit the theft of our allotropic process as a part of the *pattern* DeHarries mentioned. Have you nothing to report, Rehlek?"

"Nothing that would have any bearing—" The Callistan hesitated, then his eyes became worried. "Yes! Simply that during the past year there has been an alarming traffic in *tsith-stems* among our people. We thought we had this drug traffic stopped, but now it's growing out of hand. We can't trace how it's being entered and distributed. Under the influence of this drug our workers become restless, and easily incited to revolt." Rehlek wet his lips nervously. "Begging your pardon, Aladdian . . . these *tsith-stems* come only from the K'Yarthan Swamp of Venus!"

Rasping sounds had been issuing from Sarik, the sun-hardened little Mercurian. Now he lifted his shell-like body from the chair. His faceted eyes glittered angrily.

"We are newest in the Federation. We have tried to co-operate in every way. We even permitted the location, on our planet, of the Federation Prison for Outlaws and Irreconcilables. If what I have to report is a part of your *pattern*, DeHarries, make the most of it.

"Recently our vast Solar Reflectors—which protect our cities from the sun—were found to be tampered with! If our engineers had not discovered certain discrepancies in time, thousands of my people would have died under merciless radiations. We are still investigating this foul

piece of work. It was deliberate, not accidental." Sarik glared about the table. "I hardly need remind you—we can easily convert our Solar Reflectors into powerful weapons should the need arise!"

AT this open threat, such a clamor of protests arose that DeHarries pounded for order. He gave the floor to Jal Tagar.

"DeHarries . . . I see the reason for alarm. Similar incidents have occurred on Mars. In return for our Uranium, Earth supplies us with engineers for the maintenance and development of our Canals. As long as a year ago, there began a series of breakdowns in our Canal system! Already the desert has reclaimed vast areas of our irrigated lands!"

Carver, the Earthman from Perlac, rose to deliver the final bombshell. Using the Frequency Tuner, he had traversed the route from his adopted planet in a mere two weeks. The strange world beyond Pluto, to which many of Earth's scientists had migrated, was becoming a power and an asset to the Federation.*

Now Carver announced simply, "We have lost the Frequency Tuner. The detailed plans of this power unit, which we intended to share with the Federation, have been stolen."

DeHarries broke the stunned silence.

"And Venus had announced that the secret of allotropic metal should be shared by the Federation. Each planet knew this. Each would benefit. It doesn't seem likely that any planet individually could be behind these thefts and outrages."

"There's a frightening purpose behind it all," Rehlek of Callisto said worriedly. "Someone or *something* is seeking to cause disunity. Creating suspicion . . . It may easily lead to war!"

Jal Tagar said, "You have a theory, DeHarries?"

"A theory and a plan. It's my conviction that in our various governments, in places of highest trust, *are men who are not what they seem!*" He glanced about, saw that the others did not fully grasp the idea.

"I mean that literally!" DeHarries went on. "*Men whose minds have somehow been seized; who are now under the control of—of an alien intelligence! Something not of our Federation!*"

Sarik waved a disdainful hand. "Men whose minds have been seized? That is fantastic!"

"Is it? How much do you know of the members of your own Inner Council, Sarik? Just one alien intellect planted there could cause inestimable damage! What do you *really* know of Jal Tagar, here, beyond what you see? Or of Aladdian? Or of me? I may be an alien—though I deny it. Any one or any several of us may be *other than what we seem!*"

Aladdian shuddered, glancing around. "It's an eerie thought—and one to ponder upon! But you said you have a plan, DeHarries?"

"Yes." He glanced from face to face in the growing silence. "A very simple plan. But I like to think it will work . . ."

II

CURT EMMONS paused in his cautious stride. With a supernal sense of keening, he knew he was not alone in the darkness. He threw his shoulders aside. The *energast* recoil was no more than a soft sigh, but the beam passed so close to Curt's face he could feel the swirling heat of it.

With a muffled cry, Curt let himself crumple and fall. The muscles of his broad shoulders went tight as he pressed against the hard prison pavement. Weaponless, he realized his only chance was the element of surprise! He saw a darker shadow detach itself from the wall and come toward him. A lone Guard. The man stared down for a moment, then, relaxed, bent over the prone figure.

Curt propelled himself upward. With an oath the Guard tried to leap back, bring the *energast* into position. Curt clawed for the gun wrist. His fingers tightened. The Guard was Jovian, Curt realized in an instant of panic. His other hand found the wrist, his feet moved swiftly, then he threw all his strength into the leverage. Bone snapped, and the

* Passage to Planet X, Planet Stories, Winter, 1945.

seven-foot bulk sailed backward into the wall.

But Curt knew these Jovians! He leaped forward as the Guard tried to rise, brought his knee up under the chin with a sickening crunch. Blood bubbled from the man's lips. Curt sprang upon him, thrust an open hand into his face. He brought the other hand in a vicious, slicing blow across the hard throat muscles. The Jovian plunged forward and lay still.

Curt came to his feet, breathing heavily. It seemed unbelievable that other Guards were not attracted to the scene! But all he heard was the steady, hollow sound of the pumps supplying air to the Prison Dome. He groped for the *energast* gun, but couldn't find it now. There was no time to waste!

He hurried forward, keeping one hand outstretched against the wall. He sought to pierce the darkness ahead. A few minutes later he paused again, as another figure loomed. Curt wished now that he'd found the gun, but it was too late for that!

"Emmons? . . ."

Curt let out a slow breath of relief as the whisper came to him. He hurried forward to greet another Earthman.

"You're late," the second man said. "What happened?"

"A little trouble. How about the helmets? Get them?"

"Wouldn't be here otherwise!"

"The Martian. Did he make it?"

"Yeah, but I don't see why *he*—"

"Never mind that, Rikert," Curt snapped. "Let's go."

They reached one of the gates. The Martian was waiting. Curt stumbled over another Guard, but this one was dead. A tiny *bak-glass* needle protruded from his throat.

"We had some trouble too," Rikert explained.

Curt wondered which of them had the needle-gun, but he said nothing. When they had donned the oxygen-helmets, Curt produced a triggered electronic key.

"I managed to smuggle this. It's the only way we'll make it out of here! Don't worry about the alarms, just stay close to me. I have a plan."

Once in the exit lock, Curt had a mo-

ment of foreboding as he watched the huge inner doors close behind them. Again he applied the electronic key. The outer doors opened. They stepped into the unending lava waste of Mercury's nightside.

No sound reached them now. But Curt knew that already, in the Prison Dome behind them, the alarm was being given. He hugged the outer *crystyte* wall, hurrying along it away from the exit. The others sped after him. Rikert clicked on his speaker.

"Emmons, what the hell! This is crazy!"

"Is it?" Curt didn't stop his half running pace. "You two agreed I was to handle this! They won't think to look for us so close!"

They stopped at last, huddling against the wall. A half mile behind them the lock was opening again. Two of the surface-cars, on caterpillar treads, blasted out and away. Searchlights slashed the ragged terrain.

"They won't spend too much time," Curt said. "They figure we're dead men already." Never yet had a prisoner succeeded in reaching the Mercurian cities, hundreds of miles away on the twilight-strip. Curt's face went grim as he thought of *their* chances. They weren't trying to reach a city! Their destination was the little mountain-range somewhere on the nightside.

Ten minutes later the surface-cars came back. The Prison lock opened and closed. Grimly, the three fugitives headed into the wastes.

There'd be no pursuit now.

RIKERT strode forward purposeful as an automaton, and he was much like an automaton in other ways. As silent and grim. As big and hard, and as cold. The square lines of his face were unmoving beneath the *crystyte* helmet.

Kueelo was smaller, but he managed to keep pace. His eyes burned brightly in his finely chiselled face. Only the high-pitched, mad little tune on his lips seemed to keep him going.

Curt Emmons, perhaps more than the others, knew the chances against them. His gray eyes flicked worriedly to the

dial inside his helmet. It registered slightly over half, which meant they had two more hours of oxygen. It would be close! He set his lips tight, glanced at his companions.

He knew Rikert would bear up. It was Kueelo who worried Curt. The little Martian was leg weary, keeping pace on sheer grit alone—grit that stemmed somehow from that eerie little tune eternally on his lips!

"We're a little ahead of schedule," Curt lied. "Let's take five."

Kueelo sank down gratefully on the hard rock. Even Rikert eased his bulk down. Then in annoyance he thrust a hand against the Martian.

"Damn it, Kueelo, turn it off!"

Abruptly the tune died on Kueelo's lips. He stretched out, gazed with infinite longing at the black sky and myriads of mocking stars. He searched for Mars.

Curt stared back across Mercury's lava-waste. The Prison Dome was well behind them now. He wished he could say how far ahead their objective lay, the little mountain-range that straddled half the planet.

"Last chance," Curt told them grimly. If either of you wants to change his mind, you've just enough oxygen to make it back! They may let you in again—if you want a month of solitary at the radite mines. What about you, Rikert?"

The big man raised his head, laughed nastily. "Go back to that hell hole? I'd rather die a quick death out here. *You* getting cold feet, Emmons?"

Curt flashed darkly. He'd only made the suggestion for Kueelo's sake.

"You, Kueelo? There's a chance of our missing Landreth. We've been delayed, and he said he'd wait only ten hours with the spaceship."

The little Martian's face showed white in the darkness. His voice was soft, very soft and musical as always.

"Thanks, Emmons. But I've waited years for a chance like this. If it were a million to one I'd still say go on." Curt nodded. Sure, he knew. Kueelo was a Martian political, an "irreconcilable," exiled to Mercury six years ago when Jal Tagar's government had taken over Mars.

As to Rikert, Curt knew even less. The man had been sentenced for murder or space-piracy. It didn't matter now.

What mattered was that these two knew even less about him. He wondered how long he'd stay alive if they learned his real status!

DeHarries had taken into his confidence a mere half-dozen of his most trusted operatives. They were given widespread assignments. None knew what he would find, or where. And Curt's assignment, the Federation Prison, was toughest of all. Not even the Prison overseers knew his true identity! Curt worked with the hardened criminals of all planets, enduring the privations and hardships and awful radite rays.

Gradually, Curt became one of the select group of prisoners who helped unload the supply ship which arrived twice a year. On its last arrival, just a few days ago, a crew member had slipped a folded note into Curt's hand! The message stated that Landreth would be waiting on the dark-side, and would take three men—any three. It set the time and the place.

Landreth! Curt could scarcely believe his luck. That elusive pirate had disappeared, and was thought to be dead. Apparently not! What new scheme was he hatching now—and more important—did it have a bearing on the unseen forces which DeHarries felt were at work?

Curt selected Rikert for the escape because the man was big and tough and could handle himself well in a showdown fight. Kueelo he selected for a different reason. It was partly sentiment—but more than that, Curt had a deep-rooted suspicion that Kueelo was more than an ordinary "political"!

CURT gave the signal, and they continued across the dark uncertain terrain. Jagged rock cut into their boots. Soon they were forced to circle wide around crevices large enough to swallow a man.

Curt watched the hand on his oxygen gauge drop lower and lower. There could be no turning back now! If they didn't find Landreth's ship within the next hour. . .

Rickert spoke, worry creeping into his

voice. "We ought to be getting close, Emmons! How about using a signal flare?"

Curt peered ahead at the cobalt sky. The horizon dropped sheerly away. He shook his head.

"Only got two flares, can't waste them! Wait 'til we sight the mountains."

Rikert grumbled, but Curt saved his breath. Half an hour later they glimpsed a serrated line of cliffs low on the horizon. Curt released one of the flares in that direction. They watched it rage in a fiery arc across the darkness for perhaps twenty seconds . . . then it disappeared.

They awaited an answering signal. Anything to guide them! But nothing appeared. The darkness pressed in, almost tangible.

Despair washed over Curt like a cold wave from the sea.

"Better set your oxygen flow to one-half," he advised. They hurried the pace now, heedless of sharp rocks and dangerous gullies. Once Curt pulled Kueelo back from a steep brink just in time. The little Martian was staggering.

Could Landreth have given up hope on them, and hoisted graves? At the thought, Curt hurriedly brought out the remaining flare. With a prayer on his lips he aimed it, this time in a higher arc.

Then Kueelo was clutching at Curt's arm, pointing far off to the left.

There was the answering signal—a thin pencil of light slicing upward. It flashed on and off at intervals, but it seemed a long way!

Already, sharp pains were slicing through Curt's lungs. He stayed close to Kueelo—but the Martian's fatigue seemed to have left him now! He was giving voice again to the peculiar little aria in the higher octaves which Curt had come to know so well. In that strange tune was a challenge, a promise—and something more. It was pagan. It was strength. It got into a man's coul!

It seemed an eternity. They were nearing the cliffs, stumbling into a rocky ravine. They saw the spaceship, Landreth's ship! But the scalps of fire in Curt's lungs were unendurable. The spaceship and all the terrain danced and faded away. His legs were leaden, Kueelo staggered

against him, and somehow he managed to hold the little Martian upright.

A vague impression . . . a spilled square of light out of which a helmeted figure came leaping. Kueelo collapsed, sliding slowly away. Curt plummeted forward, gasped for air where there was suddenly none, then utter darkness claimed him.

III

THERE WAS AIR NOW. Great gulps of it. Someone had thrown back Curt's helmet, and he could hear the steady thrum of the airostat. It was beautiful music.

Kueelo had recovered, and Rikert. And a fourth man was there. As Curt came to his feet he heard Rikert's voice, a little suspicious, addressing the stranger.

"You! You're not Landreth. I thought we were going to meet——"

"Disappointed? Get going then! Back where you came from!" The stranger's voice was like a whiplash. He held an electro in his hard-knuckled fist. Rikert became silent.

"So. You'd like to see Landreth, eh?"

Rikert grinned, wet his lips a little. "Sure would! Don't get me wrong, mister. There's one man I'd like to join up with, if he's operating again!"

Curt watched the stranger, saw him grin as though secretly amused at Rikert's words.

"Later!" the man said. "Right now get this through your heads, all of you. Your lives were forfeit at the mines, and that isn't altered by your being here! I'll blast the first one who makes a wrong move." He gestured with the gun, surveyed them coldly. "Good. Now you will strip. Put your clothes over here."

He went carefully through their clothes, found nothing in Curt's or Kueelo's. But from a secret pocket in Rikert's leather suit he brought forth a deadly needle-gun. A smile creased his dark, thin face.

"You won't need *this* where you are going." The spaceman pocketed the needle-gun then turned suddenly on Curt, sharp eyes going over him. "Up! Up with that left arm!"

Too late Curt remembered the thin disc

fastened under his arm-pit, identifying him as an investigator for the Federation Prison-Board. He had adopted that merely as a cover-up. Actually his mission for DeHarries was far more important! Now Curt shrugged, tore the disc away from the paper-thin duroplast fastening.

"So," the spaceman purred, examining it. "You were sent here by the Prison-Board! And we thought no one was aware of the missing prisoners."

"Well I'll be damned," Rikert said, half in anger, staring at Curt. "If I'd known who you really were, Emmons——"

"You'd have come just the same!" Curt said icily.

"It really doesn't matter who you are," the man with the gun said softly, surveying Curt's well-muscled figure and clear eyes. "Yes, I'm glad you came. You're the type we need. This one too," he nodded at Rikert.

He turned his gaze upon Kueelo. "But I can't understand why you brought *this* one! Well, we shall find a use for him."

At the insult, quick points of fire appeared in Kueelo's eyes. Curt flashed him a warning look. Kueelo set his lips tightly.

"My name," the other was saying, "is Jeffers. Dress quickly now. Captain Landreth will want to see you, then we'll be on our way."

It became apparent to Curt that this was no ordinary spacer! It was small and trim, with a suggestion of untold speed. If the ship carried weapons, they were kept well under cover. Jeffers led them along a single corridor with staterooms on either side.

"Where's the crew?" Rikert asked.

"You three are the crew. Beyond that there's just me—and Captain Landreth." Again Curt had the feeling that Jeffers was secretly amused. He ushered them into a compartment near the control-room.

Curt stood quite still for a moment, staring around. The room was a dream. Magnificent tapestries, interwoven with *kra* plumes, covered the walls. Beneath his feet an imperial Martian rug was a splash of vari-colored splendor. He saw furniture of extinct *jragua* wood, inlaid with mosaics of semi-precious stones.

Then Curt's eyes widened, as he gazed

across the room and saw the person who rose to greet them.

She was tall, for a girl. Auburn hair brushed smoothly back from her forehead fell in waves to the shoulders of a close-fitting uniform. Her eyes were blue but unsmiling, her lips smiled thinly but didn't mean it.

"I am Lorine Landreth," she said without emotion. "If you must be amazed, please do it quickly. We have work to do!"

CURT was beyond being amazed. Thoughtfully his gaze took in her trim figure, the pale but determined face, the electro held loosely in a belt at her waist. She gave the impression of knowing how to use it.

"Captain Landreth, I presume," Curt's voice was serious. "George Landreth's daughter?"

"Correct! On both counts." She turned to Jeffers. "You made it clear that their status is not altered by their being here?"

"Of course. Don't worry, I'll see that they remember it, Lorine."

Her eyes blazed quickly. "Captain to you! See that you remember *that* Jeffers!"

He nodded, smiling with faint insolence as he leaned against the door. The girl turned back to the three prisoners.

"There is one difference. At the Prison mines you worked hard. And for a lifetime. And you died. You will work where we are going, too—perhaps not so hard, but dangerously! You may die, but at least I offer you a chance. If we succeed in our mission, you are free men. Free to change your identities and go where you will."

"That's okay by me, miss!" Rikert was enthusiastic. "Er, I mean—Captain. But look! Don't we get to see Landreth, George Landreth? I was counting on—"

The girl turned a gaze upon Rikert which reduced him to silence.

"It is my wish that we all may see George Landreth! I may as well tell you now. The purpose of our mission—is to find my father." For the merest instant, Curt saw a deepening look in her eyes which dissolved the mask of hardness. She turned quickly away, seized a sheaf of

papers. "We are wasting time here! Jeffers! Show them their assignments." Kueelo and Rikert followed the man from the room. Curt hesitated, then stepped into the control-room where the girl had gone. He may have been mistaken, but for a moment she had shown signs of being almost human.

Curt stood silent, watching her at the navigator's table. She consulted pencilled data on the papers, then swiftly, with practised fingers, she adjusted the sliding sheathes on the robot control. At last it was finished. She glanced up, saw him watching.

"Venus!" Curt exclaimed. "So that's where we're going!"

Her blue eyes surveyed him coolly. "So. You can read a robot-wheel, can you? What else can you do?"

"Around a spaceship, almost anything. Tubes, controls, magnibeam, calculations and differential, any weapon you care to mention—"

"That will do." Her narrow eyes narrowed. "I don't like men with me in space who know more about a ship than I do! Suppose you help Jeffers in the rocket room."

"Very well, Captain. But about your father—"

"Later!"

Curt nodded, looked at her a moment, then hurried to the rocket room. Jeffers said brusquely, "Do you understand magnetic stabilizers, Emmons?"

"Sure."

"Help me with these, then."

As Curt worked, his mind went back across the years, tying together threads of stories he had heard. Stories about George Landreth, one of the first men to open up the rich new territory on Callisto. He had brought his wife there from Earth. He struck a rich iridium vein and worked it slowly, alone. Until the Earth Corporations stepped in. Landreth defied them to the bitter end. His wife died unpleasantly . . .

There the stories varied. Some said that Landreth placed his daughter in the hands of relatives on Earth, before he turned pirate. Others said the girl stayed with her father, learning every trick of the

spaceways. One thing was clear: throughout the years Landreth gathered lawless men about him. More than one Corporation had gone to ruin under the incessant attacks of an enemy who had achieved a ruthlessness equal to their own! Then the attacks ceased. Landreth seemed to have disappeared.

CURT thrust these questions from his mind. At last the stabilizers and rocket-feeds were ready. Jeffers signalled the control-room, and a moment later they swept upward. Endless miles away, near the twilight-strip, Curt could see a faint pinpoint glow of a Mercurian city. He turned to Jeffers.

"One question, Jeffers. What happened to the other men you rescued from the Federation Prison?"

"We've only pulled this stunt once before. The others died."

"On Venus?"

Jeffers looked sharply at Curt, then shrugged. "Sure, on Venus. We'll arrive there in exactly three days."

Rikert came up, wiping his hands on a piece of waste. "You know," he grinned, "even at the Prison word had a way of reaching us. Any truth to these stories about Aladdian throwing a guard around Venus?"

"We may run into the Imperial Guard. But I doubt if they'll have many patrolers where *we're* going."

"Yeah? Where is that?"

Jeffers' dark face grinned at them. "Right into the K'Yarthan Swamp!" A sudden cry reached them from beyond the rocket-room. Lorine Landreth's voice! Curt was first to reach the corridor, then he stopped dead in his tracks.

They saw Kueelo, standing spraddle-legged in the middle of the corridor. An electro was in his hand. He turned it quickly toward the three men, and they fell back.

"He sneaked behind me and got my gun! Watch him, Jeffers, he'll use it!" The warning came from the girl. Curt saw her crouching out of range near a state-room door, on the other side of Kueelo. "He can't cover us both. Easy, Jeffers."

"Get his gun, Emmons. Quick!" The Martian's voice came in an excited high pitch.

Curt saw Jeffers easing behind him, away from the line of fire; glimpsed his hand as it went for his gun. Curt whirled away, sliced his hand downward into Jeffers' wrist. The electro flamed once, then clattered to the floor. Jeffers leaped for it, but Curt threw his broad shoulders into a block that hurled the man aside. Then he came up with the gun, and backed towards Kueelo.

"Nice going, Emmons. Get to those controls! I'll keep them covered."

They were not quite free of Mercury's gravity, Curt realized as he felt the spacer surge erratically, threatening to go into a spin. He saw the tight smile on Kueelo's lips.

"Hurry, Emmons! We've got the ship now!"

Curt surged past the Martian. Then he whirled, clamped his free hand across the frail wrist holding the electro. A single twist, and Kueelo's fingers opened. Curt held both weapons.

"Get to those controls!" he snapped at Lorine Landreth.

She stared at him in blank astonishment, then leaped to the controls. A moment later the ship straightened out, and they were in free space. Kueelo's eyes were blazing pools of hate as he gazed at Curt Emmons.

Curt ignored him, turned to Jeffers and tossed him his weapon. "Here, put this away. I guess Kueelo can't wait to get back to Mars—but I'll settle for the K'Yarthan Swamp."

Curt shrugged, walked forward and Jeffers levelled the electro. "The other gun, Emmons. It goes to Captain Landreth! Quick!"

Curt shrugged, walked forward and handed it to her.

She flashed him a smile. "Thanks for what you did, Emmons." She came and faced Kueelo, surveyed him coldly. "Little man, can't you wait to die? Let me assure you—another trick like that and you'll never see Mars again!"

Kueelo stalked away, eyes still blazing hatred.

IV

LORINE LANDRETH PROVED A canny navigator. She set a course far beneath the ecliptic, and for two days they did not encounter a Patrol. Curt had noticed the spacer was painted solid black and carried no insignia; an old trick of George Landreth's.

Was George Landreth connected in some way with all the far-scattered events which DeHarries called the *pattern*? Had he allowed his gnawing hate to encompass the entire Federation? All else was relegated to unimportance in Curt's mind beside this single throbbing question. War between the planets was imminent, as more and more monstrous happenings occurred without reason. Curt doubted that Landreth himself could be behind it all; it was too far-reaching and purposeful. But Curt was resolved to follow his present lead, and hope for a way to report back to DeHarries.

And there was another question. Kueelo.

Late on the second day Curt was off duty when there came a soft rap on his stateroom door, and Kueelo entered.

"The girl is studying maps of the K'Yarthan Swamp," he announced. "Jeffers and Rikert are at the controls. I think they will bear watching, those two."

Curt nodded. He studied Kueelo. The little Martian was over his anger, but now he seemed strangely perturbed.

"I've been waiting to speak to you alone, Curt Emmons. Remember, Jeffers couldn't understand why you brought *me* along? I've wondered the same thing. From the very first. There were many others to choose for the escape, strong ones like Rikert."

"You made it, didn't you?" Curt snapped. "Before this is over, you may wish you were back at the Prison mines."

"That doesn't answer my question. Why did you select *me*?"

Curt hesitated. "All right. If you must know, I always had a feeling you didn't belong at the Prison. Sure, I knew you were a 'political.' But no ordinary one! And I don't think your name is Kueelo!"

He watched the other's face, saw emo-

tion ripple across the chiselled features.

"So," the Martian said softly. "I thought you might have guessed. Was it the tune, the little aria I always sang? Many times I could feel you listening. I sensed that you knew . . . but I could not keep it within me, Emmons!"

"Doesn't that aria occur somewhere in the *Deimian Cabal*?"

"So you know that! But for you—for any Earthman——"

"I know very little about it," Curt said quickly. "I've heard that it's rooted in your religion somehow, but the thing's meaningless to me."

KUEELO stood still and straight. Curt could almost see the emotion welling up inside him like a slow ocean tide. Then Kueelo made up his mind. He spoke rapidly and without pause. "You are right. My name is not Kueelo. I am Tor Ekkov, Supreme Co-ordinator of the Society of Deimos on Mars! This cannot mean much to you, an Earthman, so I'll tell you only this—when the occasion demands we can, and often have, served as a balancewheel in the politics of Mars. Jal Tagar knew this when he took over Mars six years ago. Oh, he planned well! The twelve CoOrdinators throughout Mars were simultaneously arrested. It was a paralyzing blow. And Jal Tagar took me, the supreme Co-ordinator, by a most treacherous ruse——"

The little Martian paused. Hate blazed in the indomitable black depths of his eyes.

"So Jal Tagar completed his *coup*, and Mars was under his heel. He deemed that death was too good for *me*. Only the Mercury mines would do, for that was a slow death."

"You paint a dark picture, Kueelo, or, rather, Tor Ekkov, but all this was six years ago! The Federation has recognized Jal Tagar's government. He has ruled well, and Mars has co-operated in every. . ."

Tor Ekkov paced the floor, stopped in front of Curt.

"Do you really believe that, Emmons? What can anyone believe—*now*? He noticed Curt's start of surprise. "Yes, I have heard of the strange forces at work in the System! And let me assure you: when

dark events are brewing, you'll find Jal Tagar's hand in it somewhere!"

Curt waved a hand wearily. "Man, don't you know we're going into the K'Yarthan Swamp? You'd better start thinking about that!"

"I believe *your* mission is greater than you pretend, Curt Emmons. You're no prison-board Investigator! Why did you stop me when we had control of this ship? We could have gone back to Earth—or Mars."

"Don't ask questions, Tor Ekkov."

Tor's eyes were steady on him. "We've got to trust each other," he urged. "If I can't return to Mars, it's imperative that I get to a Tele-Magnum!"

Curt laughed outright at that one.

"We're going into K'Yarthan, and you speak of Tele-Magnums!"

"I must get my voice through to Mars!"

Tor's eyes seemed like black jewels in the pallid face. "There are those of my Society who believe I still live—and when they hear my voice, hear my aria, you will see a new Mars!"

Curt shrugged at Tor's babbling: In the face of what was happening throughout the Federation, what did he care about a new Mars? But the mention of a Tele-Magnum struck a sudden note. Lorine Landreth must have a secret base in the K'Yarthan Swamp! If there should be a Tele-Magnum there, powerful enough to contact Earth . . . Curt came back to his senses, laughed mirthlessly at such a remote chance.

In the next instant he was on his feet, as the clangor of the emergency alarm rang through the ship. For a moment he stared at Tor's startled face, then rushed into the corridor with the little Martian pounding after him.

THEY found Lorine and the others in the Control Room. The girl was calm, impassive, bending over the open receptor as a voice sliced through.

" . . . have had you in our beam for the past five minutes! As you carry no insignia, you will go into a drift immediately while we approach! Venus Guard calling. . . ."

Jeffer's dark face broke into a grin, but

Lorine remained serious. "They never patrolled this far from Venus! Jeffers, look to the emergency tubes. We may need some speed!" She turned to Curt. "Get on the V-Panel, will you Emmons? See if you can pick them out."

The crystyte panel came to life. Curt grasped the directional-finder, swung it in eccentric parabolas. Star pinpoints arced to and fro. A touch on the Magni-lens brought the blackness swimming into closer view, then they sighted the Guard. Six formidable spacers emblazoned with the Imperial Venus Emblum.

Curt glanced at the proximity dial. They seemed a comfortable distance away, but he knew what a tremendous area the network of "finder-beams" covered!

"Last warning," the voice razored. "Nullify your control immediately, or we blast!"

"They're bluffing," Lorine decided.

"They can't reach us yet. If we can get away from those finder-beams they'll never pick us up again. Jeffers, prepare for emergency blast!" She hurried to the control-console.

"This will give our position away!" Curt exclaimed.

She glanced at him impassively. "Just stay on that panel, Emmons." The little spacer vibrated anew. Rockets thundered on full power, then the spacer leaped forward, executed a wide parabola that carried it miles out of position. Almost at once Lorine cut all rockets, and they sped forward on the momentum.

"Safe," she smiled thinly. "They'll never spot us now, a solid black ship!"

Again Curt centered the Panel. The Venus Guard had broken formation, widening the area of search. Magnetic beams, pale green and swirling, criss-crossed miles of space.

Then Curt peered intently, puzzled, as a new kind of beam appeared. It seemed to uncoil across space, carrying a little bubble of brighter color before it. Suddenly the bubble burst. An expanse of blinding white light illumined the depths of space! It continued to spread outward. One edge of the perfect light-sphere very nearly touched their speeding ship!

Startled, Lorine jabbed at the rocket

studs. Once more they swept into a parabola before she cut power. Dozens of the strange light-spheres were appearing behind them now, dotting space for a thousand-mile radius, expanding, shoving back the darkness. Three more times Lorine used rockets, changing direction, before they were out of the danger zone. Then their ship was a silent black ghost speeding away.

"Fine thing!" Jeffers exploded as he watched the scene behind them. "Springing a new stunt like that. What a target we'd be if we got caught in one of those things!" He grinned at Curt. "What won't they think of next, eh?"

"Yeah," Curt said wryly. "A guy just ain't safe any more. If I were you I'd write 'em a letter about it!"

V

VENUS, MYSTERIOUS AND cloud-obscured, rolled up like a rounded ghost below them. They had approached from the extreme south polar side, and there, Curt knew, lay the K'Yarthan Swamp—a vast unexplored region some eight hundred miles across.

As they entered the first strata of clouds a curtain of hot rain swept about them, slashing across their ports and dissolving into vapor. Then they broke through, and Curt felt his insides twisting up into cold knots.

The swamp was a festering sore across the planet. A miasmic nightmare shrouded in viscous yellow fog that seemed alive as it curled up to touch the low-lying clouds. Jeffers put into play a penetrant beam that partly dissolved the fog. Lorine drove the ship relentlessly forward.

They swept lower through membranous foliage and corrupted fungi-growth reaching hundreds of feet high. There was a moment of terrible uncertainty. Then Curt saw a clear space spreading out below. A low-structured building occupied the exact center. Lorine set the craft down with no more than a slight roll, then turned to the new men.

"We have to wear protective suits here. You'll understand why. Jeffers will show you how to get into them."

The suits were of flexible beryllium-mesh, with tough rubberized helmets fitting snugly around the neck. Curt noticed that the duroplast face-plates were equipped with ingenious filter units.

"When you leave the ship," Jeffers told them, "be fast! Just stay close to me." The outer lock opened, they leaped to the ground and raced toward the building.

Curt knew instantly that the atmosphere was laden with millions of microscopic spores. The heat was insufferable. He hadn't taken ten steps, when sweat began trickling into the close-fitting collar. It burned.

He heard a sharp *sing* past his ear. Then another. Something struck his meshed arm with enough force to half spin him around. He saw a tiny, wickedly metallic beetle fastened in the mesh. More of them struck him, and others sang past liked winged bullets, to flatten against the building. He heard Rikert cry out.

Lorine was at the building now, inserting a long triggered key. There came a crackle of sparks and the door was open. "Welcome to Venus!" Jeffers said, as they flung themselves inside—then he saw that Rikert was hit. One of the beetles had imbedded itself in his wrist where he'd failed to fasten down the mesh garment.

Jeffers tore it away, crushed it underfoot. He hurried to a wall cabinet, came back with a box of evil-smelling unguent to spread over the wound.

"That'll heal soon. We must have stirred up a nest of those damned *jung* beetles!"

Curt sang down limply. Fire still burned in his lungs. So this was K'Yar-than Swamp! He found it hard to believe that far to the north were three hospitable continents with modern cities, verdant lands and mountains rearing into clean air.

Kueelo moved beside Curt and whispered, "No Tele-Magnum here, unless *that's* one!"

Curt followed his gaze. Lorine was unlocking a metal cabinet, but it was definitely not a Tele-Magnum. A bank of curious power tubes was connected with sets of coils. The girl made several adjustments, the tubes leaped into silver radiance

and the coils sang a cadence that ascended the scale beyond the audible.

Curt came over to watch. Then he stepped to a window. In the fog overhead he noticed a fine-laced canopy of wires. They came alive now, singing gently and sending down a power that dispelled the fog until only a faint obscurant mist remained.

"How long do we stay here?"

"Only tonight. Tomorrow we trek into the Swamp, but we have to wait for the Phibians."

"Phibians!" Curt stared at her.

"Creatures who live deep in the Swamp," she explained. "We couldn't get to where we're going without them."

THE STATION was stocked with food in plasti-sealed containers. They prepared their meal over a tiny atomic stove, and it was a welcome repast for the men from Mercury Prison! When they had finished, Lorine lost little time in explaining the set-up. "Now that we're here, you men have every right to know what to expect. Our task isn't easy! But we have the protective suits and weapons, the Phibians are friendly and will guide us part of the way." She moved with quick little strides about the room, as if impatient even at this brief delay. "You, Rikert. You're still anxious to see George Landreth?"

"Nothing I want more!"

"Then stay alive! That's all I ask of any of you—to stay alive." She paused. "You have questions. I'll answer them."

Rikert asked the obvious question. "How do you know George Landreth is here?"

"Because he built this Station! Jeffers and I found it here just as you see it. And I have other proof."

"That's right," Jeffers nodded. "This Station is identical to the one Landreth built at his secret base on Io. I was there with him a long time, in fact I was second in command—" He hesitated.

"Go on," Lorine waved a hand. "Tell them the story."

"About three years ago," Jeffers said, "observers reported a strange spaceship plunging in from the orbit of Pluto. Well, we watched it from Io. And I can tell you

this—it was travelling faster than anything we had at the time——”

Curt recalled the event. Astronomers had found it difficult to keep the strange object in sight. Some said it wasn't a spacer at all, but a meteor. Jeffers' voice went on:

“When this thing neared Jupiter, the planet's gravity slowed it down. We tried signalling it, but no answer. That's when Landreth determined to go out and meet it! He was that kind of man! None of us wanted to go with him—we'd braved many things in the spaceways, but this seemed foolhardy. Landreth laughed at us. He would have gone alone, but finally three of the men volunteered.

“They set out in the fastest cruiser we had—and they never came back. I never saw Landreth again.”

There was pounding excitement in Curt's brain. “I remember it now! This ship, or whatever it was, escaped Jupiter's gravity. It accelerated and plunged toward the sun. But you believe it crashed here, in the K'Yarthan Swamp?”

“Crashed, or else Landreth brought it safely here. We know, now, that he didn't die.”

“My father escaped alive,” Lorine nodded. “*Because I saw him once shortly after this!*”

Curt started. “You—saw him? You're sure it was *after*?”

“Yes! He came to Earth. Understand, I hadn't seen my father since I was fourteen, and he hadn't set foot on Earth in years.” Her blue eyes were haunted as she paced the room. “But he risked capture just to come there and talk to me. He said it was extremely urgent that I find Jeffers—and give him this!” She showed them a crude map of K'Yarthan Swamp, with a route leading south. “He seemed strange and different. Frightening! Not as I'd ever known him!”

“Different? How?”

“I—I can't explain it. He seemed under some stress. A terrible urgency, as if he hadn't much time. Before I could question him, he was gone!”

“An urgency,” Curt repeated. “An urgency to come back here!”

“I'm sure of it. I set about finding Jef-

fers, and it took me months. I finally located him on Ceres. We came here, made friends with the Phibians, even went deep into the Swamp with them. But there's a place miles from here beyond which *they* won't go. “I'm sure my father is there!” She paused. Anguish brimmed in her eyes. “Two people could never make it, though. Together we might. We'll have to fight our way.”

Curt watched this girl in growing wonderment. By some strange alchemy her mask of hardness was gone, something of pain and lost uncertainty rose in her shadowed eyes. Curt found himself suddenly being glad she wasn't criminal; at least she hadn't been with her father in the later years! Then a thought fastened upon his mind like a patina. The girl was guilty of removing criminals from Federation Prison! Such an act was punishable by death, and Curt was an agent under direct orders of DeHarries. . . .

He cursed inaudibly. What was happening to him? He had a far greater mission here! He had stumbled upon one thread of DeHarries' *pattern*, and it might result in unravelling the entire skein of monstrous events which had plagued the planets for the past two years!

“We'd better all get some sleep,” Jeffers was saying. “Tomorrow'll be a tough day, and I mean tough!”

CURT tossed restlessly in his bunk. It wasn't the steady hum of the ionization screen outside that kept him awake. He had a preternatural awareness of something impending. He sat up, and saw that someone was moving about.

Curt swung himself silently to the floor, just as silently crossed the room. It was Lorine. Curt saw the outer door open and close behind her.

Quickly he followed. The jungle clearing was free of fog now. Lorine was hurrying toward the spaceship. Curt followed her inside, then forward to the control-room. He watched her manipulating the V-Panel. Bits of outer space swept into view, together with pin-point gleams that were stars. At last she centered on one. A tiny disc of bright blue. It was Earth.

She leaned forward, gazing at the

screen. Curt was startled at the clear-cut radiance of her face. He saw the glint of tears in her eyes, and the lengthening glimmer of one that rolled down her cheek. He came forward softly.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?"

"I miss Earth," he said simply, looking up.

"All of us feel that, out here. A yearning to get back. But you——"

"I've never been back. Not since I started searching for father, two years ago." She turned her face to the screen, was silent for a moment. "It must have been terrible for you, Curt Emmons. How long were you at the Prison?"

Curt started. It dawned on him that she still regarded him as one of the regulation prisoners. But Jeffers knew better! There must be a reason why he hadn't told her!

"A long time," he answered her question. "Suppose we do find your father," he said slowly. "His life is forfeit anywhere in the Federation. I guess he and Jeffers will start their reign of outlawry again——"

Her face was troubled. "I suppose so, but I've got to find him, Curt! He's in desperate trouble here, and he's still alive. I feel it!"

Curt nodded. Then he was suddenly alert, as a sound reached his ears. It came as a faint hum far above the jungle roof. The propulsion beam of a spacer! It came louder and nearer. Curt raced for the outer lock, stared up into a far-away patch of fog. For the merest instant the fog eddied furiously, as a great bulk that seemed a silvery ghost flashed through. Then it was gone, the deafening drone diminished.

Curt whirled upon Lorine. Her face had gone white.

"The other times you were here! Did you ever see a spacer?"

"Never! I can't believe——"

"Come on." He hurried back to the control-room, clicked off the V-Panel, then began ripping away the wires leading to the directional-finder.

"Man, are you mad? What are you doing?"

"That spaced was coming in for a

landing, don't you understand? Here in the Swamp! I'm going to find out where! Quick, bring me a tool-kit."

She hurried to comply. In a few minutes Curt had the directional-finder uncovered. Two coils of thin, sensitized metal tape were revealed. He unrolled one, stretched it across the room, attached it to the terminals of the starboard magni-plates imbedded in the hull.

"A little trick I once learned. The agni-plates act as a sounding-board, the vibration is carried across this tape to the finder, and recorded. If that ship hasn't landed yet we ought to get an approximate position!"

He clicked on the magni-plate feed, Powerful coils hummed, the tape stretching across the room began to undulate gently.

"We're getting something!" Curt hurried to the finder, turned it on. The second metal tape began unwinding to a rear spool. Aberyllum needle scratched a continuous, wavering line along the sensitized surface.

"The spacer's still in flight," Lorine murmured.

"It was heading due south. It's going to berth somewhere in the Swamp!" For five minutes they watched the lengthening line, as the tape slowly unrolled. Ten minutes. Then it stopped abruptly.

"There we have it." Curt spun the tape carefully back into place. "We can follow the route now!" He stared at her. "That ship must have come down at least fifty miles from here! And we were going to fight our way through this jungle?"

"Jeffers and I flew over the Swamp dozens of times," she explained. "We've criss-crossed it from one end to the other, without spotting a single place to land! Except here." She examined the route on the tape, excitement showing in her eyes. "But we'll try it again now. This will save us days!"

It was still a few hours until dawn, but there was no sleep for Curt now. He'd had but the briefest glimpse of the mysterious spacer, but one thing he was sure of. The sound. It hadn't been the sound of a rocket-propelled ship!

His mind went back to Carver of Per-

lac, found murdered in space, the Frequency Tuner stolen. Curt was certain the silvery spacer he'd just seen was powered by a Frequency Tuner!

VI

NEVER SAW THIS DONE before, Emmons. It's a mighty cute trick!" Jeffers examined the route on the finder-tape. "But how does this guide us?"

"You'll see. We set up a circuit and run this directly to the rocket-feeds! We can't go astray."

At last all was ready. With Lorine again at the controls, the spacer rose into the heavy shrouding clouds. It was ticklish business, and Curt admired the way she upped gravs.

Here there was no dawn. Morning had come as a mere paling of the mists, but hot rain blanketed them as the little spacer drove forward.

Tor Ekkov began an endless, nervous pacing, but Curt and the others huddled over the tape, watching its undeviating movement. In a matter of minutes, Curt realized, they'd reach the place where the unknown spacer had berthed. Perhaps it were best if they didn't set down too near—

Within ten minutes their guiding tape had nearly run its course. Curt hurried to Lorine, spoke something, and she nodded. They began the descent, broke through an under-strata of clouds and were speeding over a limitless expanse of vegetation.

Curt began to understand what Lorine meant. Nowhere could he see a break in the corrupted fungi-growth and giant, spiked ferns that reached above the blanketing steam. Some of those ferns were large enough to impale a spacer!

But luck was with them. As they began a criss-crossing route Curt spied a thinning area through the haze. A narrow, slate-dark opening appeared in the jungle roof, deep and straight as though made by the slice of a giant hand.

Steadying in its course, the ship nosed toward it. There was little room to spare. A yellowish-green gloom engulfed them as

they levelled off with a thrust of underhull rockets. Mud and matted vegetation sprayed high about the ports. They sloughed to a stop.

"Nice landing," Curt commented.

"Any landing here is a nice one," Lorine said wryly. She glanced at the totally dark ports. "I wonder if we're below the Swamp! Jeffers, turn off those rocket-feeds!"

Once more they donned the protective suits and helmets. Lorine opened a locker, handed each of them an electro pistol.

"I'll feel better with this," Jeffers said grimly, lifting a long duralloy cylinder with a lens-covered bore. "Radiant gun," he explained. "Transforms matter into radiant energy, by an instantaneous stripping of electrons. Landreth used to have these at Io Base, but I worked out this smaller model myself."

THEY stepped down into soft, glutinous muck. Vision stopped five yards away. Curt expected the gloom to come alive with motion and sound and unseen terrors, but there was none of that here. A terrible quiet enfolded them.

The matted-walled chasm seemed to extend interminably. They proceeded along it, finding their vision gradually improved. Curt hurried forward, stayed close beside the girl.

"You mentioned something about a region where these—these Phibians wouldn't go. Did you ever find out why?"

Lorine nodded. "They claimed that far in the Swamp was a god that spoke to them! They were afraid of it."

"Spoke to them?"

"Yes. With the voice that has no sound. Warning them back."

Curt was startled. "The voice that has no sound. Telepathy! But it's strange we've felt nothing!"

There was no sight or sound of a living thing, but hot blasts of wind from above brought a miasmatic swamp odor. It became almost an opiate to their senses.

Curt noticed the tangled walls on either side were beginning to widen away. And there was something else, as he felt his mind preternaturally alert despite the cloying odors. He imagined he felt the faint-

est thought-impression impinging on him, subtle and eerie, almost a feeling of being under surveillance. He glanced about at the others. They were feeling it too.

Suddenly the loom of jungle broke. They emerged into a downward sloping place that seemed all swamp; a vast circular area black and quiescent, with jungle rising on all sides. Descending toward it, they noticed a vague glistening shape protruding just above the area of muck.

"The spacer!" Tor Ekkov exclaimed. "Must be the one you saw, Emmons—it crashed here!"

Curt peered closer, then shook his head. He pointed out greenish swamp tendrils entwining over and about the hull, mute evidence of time.

"It's a spacer all right," Jeffers was taut with excitement. "It's the one Landreth boarded near Io, three years ago! By all that's holy, we've found it!" They could only make out the stern, but the very size of it indicated that the rest of the hull must be gigantic, far beneath the primordial ooze.

Lorine clutched at Curt's arm, pointing. The Swamp moved. The black surface was surging up in a horrible turgid mass. In one place and then another, dark tentacles broke the surface. A central body began to emerge, huge and bulbous beyond belief! It was octopoid—ghastly and gelatinous, the body itself some fifty feet across, with tentacles sprawling the entire diameter of the swamp. It pulled its greenish-gray shape toward the protruding stern of the spacer. Like an ominous guardian it draped itself entirely around and over the polished hull. There it lay, pulsing gently, lord of all it surveyed.

And it surveyed them well! Curt found himself staring into orange-tinted eyes a yard in diameter. Clammy uneasiness took hold of him. Those eyes were bright and alert with meaning!

Curt felt overtones across his mind, saw Rikert's hand flash to his electro. But never reached it. A huge tentacle lashed out. Curt fell prone as it slashed over his head, Rikert ducked away too—but the tentacle seized Jeffers, tightened, lifted him in a sweeping arc.

The others hurried out of danger as more tentacles lashed out. Curt rolled from beneath one of them, threw up an arm against another, and felt his arm go numb from the impact. He stumbled over the radiant cylinder which Jeffers had let fall. Curt seized it, took careful aim.

Radiant energy, Jeffers had said. The beam that lashed from the lens-covered bore was radiant indeed, and it saved Jeffers' life! Curt slashed it squarely across the octopoid bulk and across the eyes. They blanked out in a flash of disorganized electrons. Jeffers came plummeting down, scrambled to safety as Curt swept the radiant beam with devastating effect. In a matter of minutes the haughty guardian of the swamp ceased to move. . . then a strange thing happened.

From the tangle of disrupted flesh and shredded integument, a tiny globule of light rose lazily up. Electric-blue, sentient—scarcely a few inches in diameter, it hung poised and gently pulsing.

Rikert took careful aim. Curt whirled, knocked his hand aside. "Don't fire! I want to see where it goes!"

Seeming to lose interest in them, the light drifted, still pulsing, toward the far edge of the swamp. There seemed to be a clearing of some sort. Suddenly the strange light dipped toward the ground and disappeared.

"Should've let me take a shot at that thing," Rikert growled.

"That was an intelligent entity! It may lead us to something."

THEY circled the swamp area in the direction the light had taken. There was still an eeriness about the place, a brooding overtone they couldn't shake off. At last they reached the opposite side, saw a smooth aisle extending into the jungle. But that's not what brought them up short, staring.

A hundred yards beyond was a milky-white mistiness reaching from wall to jungle wall. And this was not Venusian fog! It remained quiescent. An unearthly blue radiance seemed to shine beyond, giving an impression of vast distance.

Curt said brusquely, "Wait here. Keep out of sight!"

He hurried forward, keeping to the tangled jungle wall wherever possible. As he neared the barrier, it tended toward a semi-translucence. The bluish light beyond seemed to have no source, and Curt had the impression of a vast grotto that reached interminably above, curving away into the fog.

Now he could see vague outlines beyond, towering and bulky. Other shapes moved about, appearing to Curt as shadows seen through faintly frosted glass.

"Buildings — and people!" Undoubtedly, the silver spacer had come here; there was probably an overhead entrance. Curt moved closer, and heard the faintest murmur of sound beyond, as of men and machines at work.

Excitement caught at his brain. Now he knew, with sharp certainty, that he'd found the thing that DeHarries and other planetary leaders were seeking! Only for some inimical purpose would men, whoever they were, band together in so secret and inaccessible spot as K'Yarthan Swamp! Curt examined the barrier. It was some sort of power screen; he felt a dangerous radiation that decided him against trying his electro on it. He hurried back to the others.

"Can't tell how far it extends," he told them. "It's an Electronic Curtain, that's for sure! And there are men and buildings behind it."

"We've got to find an entrance somewhere." A terrible grimness took hold of Lorine, as she thought of her father. But Curt shook his head doubtfully.

"If we tried our electros on it——" This came from Tor Ekkov, and Curt laughed mirthlessly.

"Sure, you try that, if you're tired of your present identity. It would turn you into a billion disorganized electrons!"

"I have an idea." Lorine turned back to the swamp edge. She stood pondering, staring at the stern of the alien spacer. "How far would you say that goes beneath the surface?"

They saw her meaning, as she pointed out the angle of the stern. The spacer was gigantic, and the other end should almost certainly reach somewhere beneath the Electronic Curtain!

They set to work at once. By strewing thick foliage across the mud they formed a path that bore their weight. With electros at pencil-thin sharpness, they began on the spacer hull.

The metal was strange and tough, uncorrosive. Its atomic structure resisted. But after a long while it began to soften, then to melt away in radiant froth. A circular section gave way, fell slowly inward. Flash-beams revealed a long empty corridor sloping gently down.

A kind of grill-work along the floor gave them foothold as they passed slowly along the central corridor. Gradually it widened out. They saw row upon row of arched cross-corridors, with walls curving far overhead into interlacing spans and beams. Ceiling globes of green radiance cast a macabre glow along their route.

If George Landreth had boarded this spacer, there was no evidence of it now! They walked on, staring around at the widening walls that sent back solemn echoes of their footsteps. The ship was a colossus! Curt was estimating that they'd come a good quarter of a mile already, when they reached a bulwark directly across the corridor.

The wall was massive, coppery, engraved with thousands of inter-twining figures. Rikert raised his electro to burn a way through, but Lorine stopped him.

"We'd best save our weapons! They're already weak."

Good advice, Curt thought grimly. They were rushing headlong into trouble. It was Tor Ekkov at last who found the mechanism, a row of tiny hidden studs. There came a faint droning sound as he fumbled at them. Then slowly, ponderously, the entire wall slid upward.

Weapons held in readiness, they waited. But no motion or sound came from beyond. They stepped through, found themselves in a vast circular room so startling in its content that they were held taut in amazement.

HERE WERE MACHINES, OF every sort and description, every size and purpose. Bewildering units which somehow, seemed to form a definite pattern. Rows of them stood against the

circular wall. Tier upon tier of switchboards, coils, banks of tubes, reached to the ceiling.

Here, Curt knew, was the spacer's central control! But close examination showed that much of this equipment was smashed irreparably. The forward wall itself was crumpled and twisted. Then Curt noticed many bank niches about the wall, indicating that some of the machines had been removed. He frowned at that.

Tor caught Curt's eye. The Martian was standing before a towering instrument. It was alien too, but there was something familiar in the arrangement of the huge power-tubes and the coils leading up to a faceted screen.

"Tele-Magnum!" Tor whispered fiercely. "Or something mighty similar! Seems to work on the same etheric principle that we—"

Curt cut him short. Despite everything, Tor had but one thought in mind—getting his voice through to Mars!

"There's another door over here!" Rikert called.

The only mechanism on this door was a two-inch disc that swung back to reveal a small opening, interlaced with silver wires. Then, in a rack near by, Jeffers spied a tiny metal tube. He lifted it out gingerly.

"Take a chance," Lorine nodded. "This may be the exit we're looking for."

Jeffers aimed the tube into the opening. A beam of red light lanced through the wires. They heard a faint ripple of music, then a soft whirr as the door swung back.

It was no exit, however. They stared into a room where hundreds of crystalline coffins reposed, row upon row. They were cube-like, perhaps two feet in dimension. Within each cubicle was a drift of almost colorless substance which might have been either fluid or gaseous.

But what held their gaze were the things deep within the substance!

They were globules, gelatinous, tear-dropped in shape with the tapering ends down. They gently swayed and pulsed, and deep within them could be seen a central core of *electric-blue* with an interlacing of tiny filaments.

"They're in some sort of suspended ani-

mation!" Curt took a step into the room. A feeling of incredible age was about the place. Curt walked between row after row of the cubicles, making closer examination of the strange life-forms. Beyond all doubt, these were identical to the pulsing globe of light which had emerged from the body of the octopoid creature!

"Emmons, come back," Lorine called from the door. "I—I don't think this place is safe!"

Curt didn't think so either. They returned to the room of machines, closing the door carefully. Lorine stared around, perplexed.

"There must be an exit somewhere!"

Quite right, young lady. And now that you are here, I'll be glad to show you."

It was a strange, mocking voice that came from behind them. They whirled about, peering into the shadows.

FROM a little alcove beneath a tier of machines stepped an Earthman. He was tall, young, blond. Four electros swung instantly up to cover him.

Only Curt didn't hold an electro, and now he snapped, "Put those guns away!" He peered again. "I know this man!"

The stranger's smile vanished. Puzzlement came across his face as he turned gray eyes upon Curt. He seemed searching his mind, trying to recall something deeply imbedded in the matrix of the past.

"Robert Frane," Curt said. "Good lord, man, don't you recognize me? Curt Emmons! You knew me at Government Spacer School—"

"Robert Frane . . . yes. That is my name." It seemed an effort for him to recall it. It was apparent he didn't recognize Curt. Curt gave it up for the moment, studying him, wondering at the strange, puzzled look of the man. Frane spoke in clipped phrases.

"You killed our guardian. Of course. That's how we became aware of your presence. But how could you have known of this place? How did you come here?"

"We'll ask the questions, Earthman!" A strength seemed to rise in Lorine as she came a step forward, eyes blazing, electro held high. "Is George Landreth here? Answer me that!"

"George . . . Landreth." Again that strangeness about Frane, a shadow across the eyes. "I believe that such a one is here."

"Then you will take us to him. At once!"

"Presently," the man contradicted. "Just now I will take your weapons, please. All of them." It was not so much a command as a statement, seeming so ridiculous that a loud guffaw came from Rikert]. Lorine came forward, not smiling, and thrust the electro hard against Frane's side.

"Enough of this talk. Your choice! Take us at once to George Landreth or I'll blast you here and now!"

The man seemed unconcerned. "That you will never do. Look about you."

From beneath the machines a dozen men had silently entered the room. They were unarmed, except for the nets they carried—nets that flowed as if woven of fire.

"Magna-webs!" gasped Lorine. "Back, back Curt!"

But she was too late. Before Curt and the others could react to her panicked words, the strange men flung the nets at them. They only lifted their arms and released the magna-webs, which floated through the air with deceptive swiftness.

Curt grabbed Lorine to hurl her back. And then the glowing nets settled over their shoulders, the fiery strands sending numbing tingles deep into their flesh. Curt tried to reach his electro, but his hand was nerveless. Scalpels of fire sliced through his brain. He felt a vast tiredness in the instant before a rushing darkness came.

IT could only have been minutes. Curt found himself struggling up, fighting against a numbness that clung to his limbs. He saw Lorine and the others stagger erect. Frane's men were confiscating the weapons.

"I hope you will not make this necessary again," Frane said without emotion. "Believe me, it could be fatal."

Curt believed him. He set his lips grimly. Without further ado, the newcomers were hurried through one of the secret exits. Tor Ekkor gave a last, longing look at the Tele-Magnum device.

They passed through a long, illuminated corridor with walls of shining substance, leading directly away from the prow of the alien spaceship. Curt forced his way ahead to walk beside Frane.

"You're Robert Frane, all right," Curt glanced at the man's face. "Sure you don't remember me, Frane?"

The man turned colorless eyes upon Curt. A shrug was in his voice. "I may have known you once."

Curt gave it up. He turned his mind to that terrible combined potential which had struck them down. These men were possessed of a power that was more than telepathic. The octopoid creature had been telepathic too. Curt recalled the strange life-form rising from the mangled body of the octopoid, and the hundreds of similar life-forms inside the spacer. A truth was dawning that left Curt numb with horror.

He let his hand brush the bare forearm of the man walking next to him. He felt a faint tingling through his fingertips that was something more than electrical.

A car awaited them, its dark blue hull gleaming and translucent. They crowded in. A propulsion beam hummed, and they rose straight up with sickening speed.

Again Curt spoke to Frane, "Where are you taking us?"

"To our Leader! The Zemmd!" Emotion came into Frane's voice, a tone of such awe that Curt was startled.

"The Zemmd," Curt repeated, not liking the sound of it. The car came to a halt. The door slid smoothly back.

They stepped into an area aglow with a gentle radiance, ineffably blue as a summer day on Earth. Curt glanced around. They were beneath the Electronic Curtain! It reached above them in a shallow dome of indeterminate diameter. The clang of metal on metal reached their ears, and a faint sound of atomic furnaces. A few buildings were seen, and groups of men at work—Martians and Jovians, Venusians and Earthmen alike.

The captives were hurried toward a central domed building that towered above the others. Before they quite reached it, Tor stopped dead in his tracks. Across his face came an indescribable look of hate as he uttered a word. A name.

"Jal Tagar!"

A group of men had come from a nearby building, and among them was Jal Tagar, the Martian Overlord! In that split second of recognition a bitter taste of hate seemed to rise up in Kueclo. He would have leaped forward. Only Curt's fierce grip held him back.

Inpatiently, Frane motioned them on. They entered the central building, passed into a huge circular chamber that seemed alive with a violet color reaching from floor to ceiling and wall to wall. Here there was utter stillness. Even the floor was soft and cushionly, absorbing the sound of their entrance.

Frane and his men seemed waiting for something. As their eyes became slowly adapted to this room they saw a patch of deeper color across the far wall. It moved. Gradually it changed size and shape. Purposeful, deliberate, it drifted slowly tip. Then, somehow, as if by a mental as well as visual perception, they saw it clearly.

Here was a super creation, huge and wondrous beyond belief! The thought leaped instantly to Curt's mind. It was more than mere color. It seemed composed of thousands of the smaller, radiant tear-drop shapes, yet a complete entity in itself and infinitely more alive! Beyond doubt it was self-created, could add or subtract from itself at will. Here was the thing Frane had referred to so reverently as the Zemmd!

Spinning, gently pulsing with some inner sentience, it was a thing of horror yet surpassing beauty. It drifted toward them. It probed at them with fingers of violet light.

FRANE and his men threw themselves to the floor in an attitude of worship. The sight disgusted Curt. No doubt remained now! Inwardly they were as alien as the composite thing drifting there above them. It went beyond mere worship. Here was on undeniable affinity!

Rikert was muttering. Then he acted with the stupid bravado of his kind. He flung himself toward one of the prone men, grabbed an electro and whirled toward the drifting bulk. Lorine screamed

a warning, a shrill lance of sound in the soundless room.

For the merest instant the great radiant shape tumbled back. Almost, it seemed afraid. Then it came drifting forward, fast, swirling angrily. In a blur of motion Curt whirled upon Rikert, swung a heavy fist to the man's jaw. Rikert dropped to the floor, and Curt kicked the gun from his hand.

Zemmd's drifting bulk paused, as if surveying this scene with some inner faculty. Slowly the radiant anger died away. Rikert came up from the floor, muttering balefully, and Curt gripped his arm.

"Quiet, you fool! If you value your lives, don't move, any of you!"

But the entity seemed to have lost interest in them, for the moment at least. Its probing light resolved into a blanket of soft color that reached down to encompass Frane and the others. The men came to their feet. Now they seemed in mental rapport, doubtless recounting the story of these newcomers.

Then a part of the light focussed, reached out. Curt steeled himself against it. It was cold but not unpleasant. It merely brushed over them, clung for a moment, then drew away. Curt had the fleeting impression that it was dismissing them because it knew, already, all there was to know about their basic life-principle and their science as well!

Curt was almost sorry. He would have liked to study this entity more. But the thing drew a veil of deepest purple about itself and drifted back into the dim recesses of the chamber. Once more Frane and his men made obeisance, then herded the captives from the building.

THEY were taken this time across the compound, away from the area where the work was going on. Curt noticed that most of the activity centered around one particular building. He wondered if the silver spaceship he'd seen could be there! Like a jig-saw puzzle, the reason for all this activity was beginning to take shape in his mind.

He flashed his companions a warning look, said tentatively to Frane, "What happens to us now?"

Frane answered him obliquely. "Already we are aware of all that led to your coming here. It is unfortunate. There must be no interruption of our plans now—so I think you will become a part of us."

Curt had a pretty clear picture of what becoming a "part" of them meant! To have one of the radiant life-forms somehow enter his body, take possession of his mind until all that was individualistic, all that was Curt Emmons, would be gone! To be under the encompassing control of that entity they called the Zemmd! It was evident that every man here, Earthman or Martian or Jovian, was merely a controlled unit. But for what ultimate purpose? Curt felt a chill along his spine as he remembered the hundreds of alien forms waiting patiently, in suspended animation . . .

Tor's voice, bitter with hate, broke upon his tumult of thoughts. "Become a part of you—just as Jal Tagar did? A traitor to everything that we—"

"You have no choice," Frane replied in cold, unhuman tones. "Every man here is part and substance of the great Zemmd. Just as the sum and total of all that is in your brains will become a part of him." He turned his gaze upon Rikert. "Even this one, who sought to defy the Zemmd, will become a part."

"Yeah? We'll see about that!" Rikert laughed unpleasantly.

They were silent then, under the watchful guidance of Frane and his men. Once more they were taken below the level of the compound, then ushered into a plainly furnished room.

"You will not lack for comfort," Frane said, "but you must remain here until time for the transition. I promise it will be soon!" There was pride in his tone, as though conferring a great honor upon them. He employed a metal device in the arched doorway. A sheet of crackling color passed across it, effectively barring the entrance.

Rikert leaped forward in a last effort, but a searing heat from the barrier stopped him. Bitterly he turned back.

"Fine thing, Emmons! If you'd let me blast that hunk of brain-trust when I had the chance——"

"You'd be dead now, and the rest of us with you! Can't you ungroove that brain of yours, Rikert?"

Rikert surged forward, fists clenched, but Jeffers stepped between the men.

"I don't know, Emmons," Jeffers said slowly. "I think Rikert had the thing scared there for a minute. Didn't you notice the way it moved back from the electro——"

"It was a darn fool thing to try, and this kind of talk isn't helping us!" Curt turned abruptly, began examining the room.

Walls, floor and ceiling seemed to be of solid-hewed stone with no break of any kind. The arched doorway failed to reveal the source of the radiant barrier; it was electronic, Curt was sure.

Lorine was a pitiful figure, despair making an unreal mask of her face. All the fine courage that had carried her this far, seemed to fail her now.

Once more Tor hummed the high-pitched aria which Curt hadn't heard since they left Mercury. The tune seemed to sustain the little Martian in times of trouble. Jeffers and Rikert were aimless automatons pacing the room.

Curt sank down and let despair wash over him. Yet a thought, half-formed, struggled to emerge from the recesses of his mind; something he had noticed about that entity, Zemmd; an idea that danced away as he sought to remember.

He couldn't quite grasp it. It was maddening.

Such a weariness of body and mind came upon Curt that he fell into a fitful sleep. His last conscious thought was of the sentient entity, of which they were to become a part.

All would be over then.

CURT DREAMED. A great arctic wind, alive as if with a snapping intelligence, seemed to roar about his huddled carcass. Far away a door whispered open and closed with a sigh. A stranger seemed to have entered the room, a great towering figure with silvery hair, who stood looking down at them and then paced away in the gloom like the going of a breeze.

Curt rolled over, mumbling in his sleep.

The wind crept back like a padding cat, whispering in his ears. It resolved itself into a voice, a human voice very real and urgent. Curt sat up abruptly. This was no dream, the towering stranger was still there.

Somehow he had passed through the electronic curtain across the doorway . . .

Curt leaped to his feet as he recognized George Landreth.

VII

THE OTHERS CAME QUICKLY awake. Lorine stared, then with a sob threw herself into her father's arms. Landreth comforted her, his face twisting strangely. He had aged greatly, Curt knew, he was still a dominant figure of a man.

"Why did you do it, child, why?" Landreth spoke with a great effort. "You should never have come here!"

Startled, Jeffers was staring at the electronic barrier. "Man, you came through that curtain! How is it done?"

Rikert said fiercely, "Are you one of these things, too?"

"I'm one of them, heaven help me, but soon I won't be! You must listen carefully now. I haven't much time!" Landreth paced the room with great uneven strides, face still twisting, his voice coming with an effort.

"They call themselves *Energons*. Their life-principle is ionized protoplasm, that's as near as I can describe it! They subsist on the energy-source fields that originate within all planetary bodies. Electric, magnetic, gravitic, call it what you will. They left their System, far beyond Pluto, because it's in a state of disintegration for lack of the energy-magnetic source—" Landreth's features had gone pale and tight, as if some ghastly struggle were occurring within him.

"I and three others boarded their ship. It drove toward the sun . . . we couldn't stop it. We barely managed to bring it to a crash, here. In the crash some of the *Energons* were released, they took possession of our unconscious bodies . . . and they evolved their plan . . . they must be

stopped!" With a great effort Landreth managed to hold his body erect.

Curt's mind raced. He saw the rest. Landreth and his three men were only the beginning. *Through them, completely Energon-dominated, the net had spread!* Other men had been captured out of space and brought here. The *Energon* life-forms had been taken secretly to other planets, to seize upon bodies and bring them into *Energon* control! The plan had taken two years, but they had selected well. Jal Tagar of Mars had been reached, and doubtless others among the highest officials and scientists in the Federation! This explained it all, the growing havoc and sabotage—

Curt saw the ghastly pattern, then he saw Landreth collapse against the wall as if all strength were being drained from him. Lorine hurried to his side, but Landreth waved her away.

"No, child, don't worry about me now! Heaven knows I've hated Earth. . . I've done some terrible things in my time . . . but nothing so terrible as allowing these creatures to get foothold here . . ." He pulled himself erect. "Jeffers! Has the Federation plunged into war?"

It was Curt who answered. "They're on the verge of it!"

"That is their plan. Already they have the secret of all our weapons. They have the Venus allotropic metal. They have the Frequency Tuner! With it, they can return to their System and be back here within a year! They'll bring hundreds of thousands of *Energons* . . . They hope we'll be at war . . . our planets will be easy pickings!"

"The silver spacer!" Curt snapped. "They're leaving in it?"

"In a few days. The Frequency Tuner has been installed! Some of the men took it for a test flight yesterday." Again Landreth staggered, as if fighting a battle within. "The spacer is well guarded, but I might get you weapons . . . as for me . . .

"Then hurry, man!" It was Rikert, eager. "Just let me get my hands on an electro again!"

"Two of you come with me."

Curt and Rikert stepped forward. Landreth looked at his daughter as if there was

much more he wanted to say. But there wasn't time. He held her close for a moment, then thrust her away. "Take care of her, Jeffers!"

Lorine's eyes were red-rimmed, as if she knew she'd never see her father alive again. They all knew it.

Landreth inserted a three-pronged device near the doorway. The curtain vanished. The three men stepped through, and Landreth tossed the key back to Jeffers.

CURT observed the man closely, as they reached a car which sped them toward the compound above. Landreth seemed drawing upon his last energy-reserves. Curt wondered how the man kept going! And if he was *energon* controlled, why had he come to help them?

"The *tsiuh-drug*," Landreth gasped, as if sensing Curt's wonderment. "It allows you to regain your identity . . . but only briefly. I didn't want Lorine to know. . . that I'm dying!"

Curt was aghast. Only Callistans could withstand the ravages of this drug, and eventually it destroyed even them. Landreth must have taken enough to kill two ordinary men! Now the *Energon* force within him was regaining control. Tiny particles of light came from his bare face and hands, similar to radium disintegration seen under a powerful microscope.

"Landreth! Will electros kill these men?"

"The Earthian bodies—yes. But not the *Energons*. Watch out . . . for the potential! That one they call the Zemmd . . . there is no——"

His words were suddenly cut off as he clutched at his throat. Their car reached the upper level. Here the pervading blue had deepened to a simulation of night, but still they heard the sounds of work going on.

"Hurry, man! The weapons first!" Rikert was urging.

Landreth nodded. Even that was an effort for him now. He seemed suffering untold tortures. Supporting Landreth between them, they neared a low-structured building which he indicated. But Landreth fell. He was a dead weight in their grasp, then he crumpled to the ground.

"The spaceship—wait until——" He tried to say more, but the words came slurred and unnatural.

They left Landreth there, hurried on to the building he had pointed out. They pushed into a large shadowy room. It seemed a storeroom for tools, as well as strange machines similar to those in the smashed *Energon* spacer.

"Here they are!" Rikert spied the weapons, apparently the same ones Frane had taken from them. These *Energon*-controlled men were so contemptuous of Earth weapons that these had been tossed aside! "What next? Try and get to that spacer?"

"Too many men about! We'll have to wait." Curt felt that was what Landreth had tried to tell him. Rikert grumbled; with an electro in his hand he felt he could overcome any obstacle. Remembering Lorine and the others, Curt thrust three electros in his belt and cradled the lensed radiant-gun. They hurried from the room.

LANDRETH was dead. But now, with a feeling of danger, Curt suddenly straightened away from the body. It glowed, as is from a weird inner aura! The aura seemed to coalesce, take definite form. An *Energon* emerged directly upward from the earthly remains! Spinning, crackling angrily, it hung poised for a mere instant then darted straight at the two men.

With an oath, Rikert swung his electro up and sent a charge at the six-inch globe. It connected, sent the thing buffeting back—but that was all. It swept beneath the beam and darted upon Rikert. It fastened just below his throat. Rikert screamed, clutched at the vibrant shape, but his fingers seemed to sink through it. Then the *Energon* was gone—had completely entered his body!

The event was so swift that Curt stood numbed with horror. To fire would have meant hitting Rikert. Now Curt saw the man stiffen, saw the startled expression leave his eyes. A queer emotion rippled across Rikert's features . . . then he whirled upon Curt, the electro uplifted.

"Rikert, you fool!" Curt's cry was in-

stinctive as he flung himself aside. The electro-beam passed so close to his face he could feel the swirling heat of it.

"Rikert——" But Rikert was no longer Earthian, he was *Energon*! The thought stabbed at Curt even as he brought the radiant beam around in a swift arc. It slashed across Rikert's body. A sickness rose within Curt, but it was his life or Rikert's now! He held the beam fast, saw Rikert go down in a mass of disintegrant flame. In seconds it was all over. Curt waited tensely, but this time there was no sign of the *Energon* form.

Could the radiant beam have destroyed it too? But here was no time for speculation. Through the deepening gloom he saw a group of men approaching. If they'd seen the flash of the gun——

Curt seized what was left of Rikert's body, shuddering as it seemed to fall apart in his hands. But he managed to drag it into the building's shadow, then did the same with Landreth's. The men were coming nearer. Curt crouched back in the shadows, gun ready. They passed him by, heading toward some rough stone buildings that apparently served as barracks.

Now other men were heading toward the barracks, as the sound of work died away. Apparently they needed rest, despite the *Energon* forces. Curt peered toward the central building where the Zemmd reposed. Did it sleep too? Curt doubted that. At all costs they must avoid the supernal power of the thing!

He remembered. Frane's words, "You will become a part of us; I promise it will be soon."

He must get back to the others! Curt waited until the way seemed clear, then darted across the compound to where Landreth had left the car. Seconds later he was descending to the lower corridors.

A GLOW from the electron curtain showed him the room. Curt raced forward, a single thought hammering at him now. They had weapons! It meant a fighting chance, if they could avoid the thing that happened to Rikert . . .

Then Curt stopped. The curtain still crackled across the doorway, an impenetrable barrier. But he heard Jeffer's voice,

"I tell you it's true! Emmons is an official agent of Earth government. Suppose we do pull out of this, what'll your life be worth? He'll take you back for trial——" A pause, then:

"That spacer is allotropic metal! And we'd have the Frequency Tuner—think of it! We could build up the organization again, you and I, Lorine. We know all the secret bases, and how your father operated. He'd want you to go on, Lorine——"

Through the rage that rose up to choke him, Curt called out to them. He saw the blurred figure of Jeffers move toward the door, then the curtain vanished as Jeffers used the key. Curt stepped quickly inside.

"So that's your game, Jeffers! Back to space-piracy, and you think you'll use the spacer the *Energons* have built here! You'd even talk Lorine into it with you."

Jeffers' dark face creased in the barest semblance of a smile.

"Landreth told me to take care of her, didn't he? After all, she used to be part of our crew, and before I see *you* take her back for trial——"

Curt turned to the girl, spoke softly.

"Your father is dead, Lorine. I'm sorry." He saw her features tighten. She seemed a mere automaton, beyond all emotion or grief. Jeffers had taken advantage of this in trying to talk her into his plan. Curt touched one of the electros at his waist.

"I should burn you!" he told Jeffers in a cold, tight voice, and Jeffers went pale. "As it is, we're a hell of a way from being out of this spot, and we'll need you! We'll have to make a try for that spacer." He tossed an electro to Jeffers, handed one to Lorine.

"What happened to Rikert?"

"He's dead too." Curt didn't explain further, for he suddenly knew what was wrong here. He whirled upon Jeffers.

Tov Ekkov! Where'd he go? Why'd you let him leave here?"

"He insisted on it. Something about a Tele-Magnum! He was driving me crazy with that damned tune of his——"

Curt swore inaudibly. "How long has he been gone?"

"Not long. *You've* only been gone twenty -minutes." Jeffers shrugged. "Anyway, he acted crazy. Why worry about him?"

"Why? He'll ruin whatever chances we have! We've got to stop him!" Curt raced from the room, with Jeffers and Lorine pounding after him.

At the far cross-corridor Curt paused uncertainly, staring around.

"What's it about, Emmons?" Concern was in Jeffer's voice now. "What's that Martian up to?"

"Back there in the spacer—he spotted a Tele-Magnum! If he manages to operate it, the Zemmd is going to know it! We won't have a chance!"

VIII

CURT HURRIED TO THE RIGHT, not sure of his direction now in this underground place. But he stopped abruptly at the next corridor. His heart leaped. Huddled against the angle of the wall was the body of a man.

Curt turned him over. It was the man he knew as Frane! Twisted tightly around his throat, cutting into the flesh, was a plasticoid belt that Curt recognized as Tor's.

Jeffers was right. Tor had gone fanatical crazy, determined that nothing would stop him from reaching the Tele-Magnum and getting his voice through to Mars! But now another thought sliced into Curt's mind. The *Energon-form* which had inhabited Frane's body! There were two alternatives. Either it had emerged and seized control of Tor, or had sped back to give the alarm.

There was no time to waste! At the end of this corridor Curt saw the crumpled prow of the alien spacer. He hurried toward it, Jeffers and Lorine running to keep pace beside him. Curt squeezed into the low-arched doorway, beneath twisted and tumbled metalloy beams. Again he was in the room where they'd seen the array of machines, including the one Tor thought was a Tele-Magnum.

And Tor Ekkov was there. Curt knew it, as the angry sound of an electro beam sang close. It splashed against a bulkhead

beside him. Curt waved Jeffers and the girl back, then pressed forward.

He saw Tor. The man was still Martian, Curt could tell that; the *Energon* hadn't reached him. But a glint of madness was in the depths of his eyes, as he held an electro in his tight-knuckled fist. He must have taken it from Frane, Curt thought.

And he solved the secret of the Tele-Magnum! Curt heard a faint hum, saw the glow of the selector screen as selenic cells poured power into the trans-etheric beam. Curt came a step nearer, into the room.

Again Tor's electro splashed fire at him.

"So it's you, Curt Emmons. No, don't come any closer!" The Martian's eyes darted to the lensed radiant-rifle Curt held cradled in his arm. "Throw that thing on the floor. I mean it! I'll blast you!"

Curt did as he was told. The Martian had gone mad. Helpless and weaponless, Curt glanced at the screen. A shifting blur was focussing—Turibek, capitol city of Mars! Tor had managed to get the beam through!

"Don't try to stop me, Emmons. We'll never get out of this alive, I realize that now! But I swore I'd get my voice through to my people! Six long years I've waited——"

Curt tensed, almost leaped forward, but Tor held the weapon steady upon him. It was then that Curt felt a pronounced overtone across his mind. He knew the Zemmd had contacted them!

"Curt!" It was Lorine's whispered voice in the doorway behind him. He felt the grip of an electro pressed into his hand.

"We had a fighting chance, Tor," Curt grated, "but you've ruined that! The Zemmd has contacted us. He'll send his men down here. Yes, we'll die!" He brought the electro unobserved to his side.. "And you'd leave the entire Federation prey to these things because of your damned stupid fanaticism about Mars!"

"Don't try to stop me!" With his free hand Tor brought the Martian scene sharper into focus. Nothing else mattered to him.

"A last chance, Tor! You can reach

Earth on that thing. Let me contact Earth and warn them of what goes on here! Even if we die, they can send the Fleet and blast this place——"

Curt saw it was no use.

He brought his gun around fast, tried a snap shot from the waist. But Tor was faster. He swayed aside, then his own electro sent its beam.

Curt's arm went numb from wrist to shoulder, as the Martian's beam caught his gun squarely and sent it spinning from his grasp. Curt dived low, in a try for the radiant-rifle a few yards away. Again Tor blasted. A spray of molten froth from the floor sent Curt tumbling back. He poised for another try. To think of failure now was to think of death!

But he had failed. This was death!

He heard Lorine cry out, heard Jeffers cursing behind him, as a rush of feet came toward them down the corridor!

JEFFERS was battling for his life. A score of men were converging upon them. Jovian, Martian, Earthmen alike, they had but one purpose as they rushed forward under Zemmd's mental command.

That purpose was to kill!

But it was they who died, as Jeffers swept his beam in a deadly crossfire. Lorine had retrieved the electro, and she joined the battle, crouching beside Jeffers in the narrow doorway. Luckily it offered a measure of protection. A few of these men were armed. Beams slashed and glanced from the walls. In a matter of seconds the place was a hell of heat and blinding light.

Tor was intent upon the Tele-Magnum now. Curt sprang for the radiant-rifle, came up with it, whirled to join the battle. But already the men were falling back out of range! They left four of their dead upon the corridor floor.

In the brief respite Curt remembered Landreth, and the *Energon-form*. The same thing was happening now! The bodies coalesced with an inner aura of electric blue. Four *Energons* emerged swiftly and hung poised, spinning, crackling with angry radiance. Then they darted forward.

"Don't let them touch you!" Curt hurled

Lorine aside, sprang forward with rifle upraised. Before he could touch the firing stud, the *Energons* were tumbling back, Wildly—as if in panic!

Curt stared. It wasn't his weapon they feared——

Then Curt knew!

It was Tor Ekkov's voice behind him, sending his strident, high-pitched aria into the telecor-beam to Mars. Sound! These things feared super-sonic sound!

Lorine screamed, clutched at Curt's arm.

Far down the corridor, reaching almost from wall to wall, the huge bulk of the Zemmd itself sped toward them. Streamers of angry violet splashed before it, illuminating the scene. The Zemmd's own men tumbled pell-mell out of the way.

The four smaller *Energons* sped toward the parent bulk, touched, and merged. But the Zemmd never paused. Tor's high-pitched tune seemed not to affect it!

A heavy potential rose crackling from the walls. Lorine crumpled and went down. Jeffers, reeling upon his feet, still blasted with the electro but to no avail. Part of the potential washed upon Curt and sent him staggering . . .

Curt hurled himself back into the room, jabbed the rifle at Tor before the Martian knew what was happening.

"Sing, damn you, keep singing! Send your song to Mars! You were right after all!"

Tor's eyes went wide, but he needed no urging. He sang! The Martian sibilants were meaningless to Curt, nor did he care. Tor's voice reached the higher octaves, far higher than any operatic star of Earth! Down the scale, then up, and up, endlessly, Tor sang his message to Mars. It took on a savage note, something of the pagan was in it—and something of fright.

For now it was Curt who had gone mad with fanatical purpose!

"Sing, damn you, or I'll blast you where you stand." He reached to Tor's side and lifted the electro. He reached to the Tele-panel and fumbled at the controls.

Suddenly the sound amplified a thousand-fold. It flooded the room, reverberating, rebounding into the corridor from wall to wall, as selenic cells poured additional power into the instrument.

"Sing!" Curt shouted. And Tor nodded. Sanity seemed to come back to him, and he realized what was happening.

Curt hurried to the corridor. Already the Zemmd's potential was diminishing! The great bulk was tumbling back, trying to escape the waves of strident sound that washed upon it.

Now Curt could *feel* the shrieking crescendo, like a file rasping over naked nerve-ends. And the Zemmd seemed to disintegrate! The color died away. It broke apart into hundreds of the smaller *Energon* shapes.

They were dull and disorganized now, moving aimlessly, crashing into the walls where they clung, then slid to the floor.

But a few of them retained their inner life-force! They came surging forward. Curt threw up the radiant-rifle, spread a swath of disintegrant power that sent them buffeting back. Gradually they blanked out, until nothing moved in the length of corridor. The Zemmd's men had long since vanished from the scene.

IT WAS OVER in minutes. Behind Curt came a harsh roar, then a crash of tubes and metal as the Tele-Magnum failed under the overload of power. But Tor still sang.

Curt stepped warily forward, touched one of the grayish translucent shapes. It was warm. A decided shock, more than electrical, went through his arm.

"These things aren't finished yet! We've got to hurry!" He stared at Lorine. "What happened to Jeffers?"

She shook her head. Horror was still mirrored on her face. But Jeffers was gone! Somehow he had managed to make his way out!

All weariness vanished, as Curt raced back through the corridors with Lorine hurrying after him. He had a chill premonition of what Jeffers was up to!

A deathly silence settled over them. Tor's singing had stopped. Not until they reached the lifts did Curt notice that Tor had caught up with them. The little Martian was deathly pale but his eyes fever-bright, as he shook his head drunkenly and clutched at his throat.

Curt paid him no heed now. They tum-

bled into one of the cars. A propulsion beam hummed, and they rose swiftly toward the upper compound.

Jeffers was there, battling his way past a score of the Zemmd's men. But there was a great difference in these men now. They seemed disorganized and aimless without the co-ordinating, driving power of the Zemmd!

Jeffers was heading toward a hangar-like building. The spaceship with the Frequency Tuner! The man's scheme was obvious now; he had given up on Lorine, decided to try it alone!

Curt hurled himself forward, and a path opened for him as the men scurried to cover before the blast of the radiant-rifle. At all costs he must reach Jeffers—

He was too late. Already Jeffers had reached the building fifty yards away. He fumbled at the door, then disappeared. Curt was there seconds later. A gorge of despair rose in him, as he found the door barred from the inside.

There might still be time! Jeffers would have to find the secret of the Electronic Curtain reaching above them. Frantically, Curt blasted at the door. The metal resisted stubbornly, but gradually it began to melt away.

Then, from within, came a smooth droning sound. It increased in tempo. The building trembled against the full reverberant power. The Frequency Tuner! Jeffers was going to try to drive *through* the Electronic Curtain.

Curt realized his danger, and whirled away. The building smashed apart like an eggshell, hurling debris in all directions. Curt plummeted forward, caught a glimpse of the silver spacer streaking obliquely up on the whining power of the Tuner . . .

But it wasn't enough! It struck the Curtain and penetrated part way, and there it dangled. There came a scintillant hell of fire and flaming metal. In seconds, the spacer's hull became cherry red and then white. Huge molten blobs of it dripped down, then an explosion sent them scattering across the compound.

What was left of the spacer came slipping out of the gaping rent in the Curtain. Gravity took it. It fell in a fiery tangle of wreckage.

Curt was scarcely aware that his legs propelled him away from the scene.

He caught sight of Lorine and Tor Ekkov, and hurried toward them. They huddled in a doorway and looked out upon the scene. Flames crackled up from a few of the buildings. None of the other men were in sight; they had scurried somewhere to safety.

"There went our last chance! Jeffers fixed everything!"

Curt's voice was a well of bitterness. These *Energons* weren't finished by any means, and Curt knew it. Their work would go on . . .

But his mission for DeHarries was finished. The secret of this place was still secret.

The fate of the Federation had rested upon Curt's shoulders, and he had failed.

AS IF in answer, a blaze of violet light appeared far across the compound. It was the Zemmd again!—a smaller entity now, but Curt knew it would increase in power as more and more of the *Energons* revived to join it!

It moved slowly, as if searching. *Searching for the Curtain—and Lorine.* It disappeared, appeared again, and once more vanished from sight.

"No use fighting that thing." Curt looked down at his hands, then laughed bitterly. He had lost the radiant-rifle somewhere. Even his electro was gone. "Maybe if we keep out of sight, it'll think we perished in the spaceship!"

"Curt!" Lorine's huddled figure came suddenly erect, she stood taut with excitement. Then they all heard the sound. Somewhere overhead, but coming nearer. The sound of a spacer!

It sped past the broken rent in the Curtain a hundred feet above. It returned, braked, hovered on underhull repulsion beams. Then it eased through the hole in the Curtain with little room to spare, trailing part of the K'Yarthan fog with it.

Already Curt was racing toward the spacer, as it settled down. A man stepped from the lock, others crowding behind him.

"Back! Back there, you!" The man levelled a deadly power-rapier at Curt.

"Who are you, and what is this place?"

"Never mind who we are," Curt grated, "lift us out of here!" He recognized the Imperial Venus Emblem on the man's tunic.

"We were Tele-casting, and a strange beam cut into our etheric channel! The Empress Aladdian ordered that it be traced. Our directional-finders brought us here." The Venusian Guard stared around at the flaming holocaust.

"Man, if you value your lives, get us in that ship and lift gravs!"

Something of Curt's urgency caught at the man. He nodded, turned and gave swift orders. The radiant bulk of the Zemmd came into sight again and Curt saw it speeding, whirling toward them.

They tumbled into the ship. The lock closed, and seconds later they were lifting up, carefully, through the Curtain. There the spacer poised. The Venusian stared through the under ports at the blazing, angry bulk of the Zemmd.

Something of the truth mirrored in the man's eyes as he turned to Curt.

"Shall we try blasting it? We have neutros and Ingrams! We have——"

"No! It'll take super-sonic weapons to completely destroy these things. Powerful ones. Take me to Aladdian! I must contact Coordinator DeHarries of Earth."

TOR EKKOV paced endlessly, as they sped toward the hospitable continents of Venus. His glorious voice was gone, but his eyes had come alive and vibrant. He knew he'd soon return to his own people.

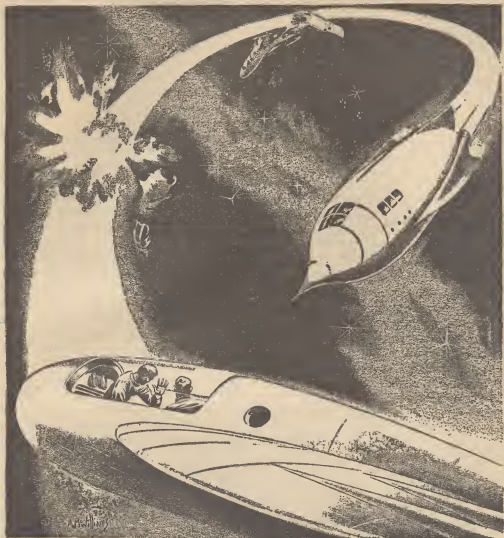
But Lorine . . . she was a forlorn and shattered figure. Her face had gone tragic, especially at the mention of Earth.

"You're still thinking of what Jeffers told you?" Curt said. "Yes, Lorine, I'll have to take you back to Earth. But I can get absolute amnesty for you now. I shall demand it! And there are other reasons, Lorine. There are reasons——"

A tightness in his throat made his voice sound strange.

She whispered, "Yes?"

Curt drew her to him, and she was happy in his arms.



Like a vengeful comet, she sought us out,

RUNAWAY

By ALFRED COPPEL, JR.

Ripped by an asteroid stray, the space-ship drifted helplessly . . . until suddenly, across the shuddering deeps, a strange voice called to her.

I RECALL THAT WHEN I WAS just a boy hanging around the old Mojave space yards, there was an old timer there who used to sing an old song. He learned it from his father and he from his grandfather who used to prospect for gold in the Death Valley country.

*Oh, my darling, oh my darling,
Oh, my darling Clementine,
You are lost and gone forever,
Dreadful sorry, Clementine! . . .*

The old timer was really ancient when I knew him, because he could remember

the war with the Federal States that used to be called Germany and Japan. There was a strangeness about him, or so it seems to me now. Listening to him sing those pioneer ballads caught at the imagination and woke dreams. Of course, I was young then, and impressionable. But his tales were my gospel. There were some among the yard hands who claimed he was a survivor of the first crew back from Luna, but that was probably loose talk. In those days every yard had its "Selenite man."

It was from him, though, that I heard my first spaceman's yarns. Yarns about the ships that were built when Venus and Mars were the outposts of the system . . . the frontier.

He used to tell of the strange ways in which those old ships took on personality . . . character, if you like . . . in the eyes of the men who crewed them. When he spoke I could almost feel the thrill of those punishing vertical takeoffs, and I could smell the stink of gasoline and feel the icy nimbus of liquid oxygen. I could feel too the throbbing of the first crotchety atomics under my feet and the quivering sense of aliveness it gave . . .

Somehow, I don't believe the old man was embroidering fantasies for me. I think even then he knew.

I grew older and left Mojave for a dozen berths on as many ships, but I never forgot the old timer and his stories. And it's odd that the ship that proved his claims to me should bear the name he used to sing in that pioneer ballad of his. My first command . . . the R. S. Clementine.

I KNOW that you'll not believe what I'm going to say about that ship. The Spatial Academy had filled you with book-learning and covered you with gold braid. But it's killed your imagination. Academies have a way of doing that. To you this will be an old spaceman's shaggy dog story. But no matter. I know what I know. I was there when Clem was born, and I watched her as she went home.

Fortunately, atomic drives are outdated now. The new warships are the regular thing. Atomics didn't last long, and in

a way it's a good thing. At least no crew will ever have to go through what mine went through, and no ship turn into a fey thing like Clem did.

The strange thing about it is that I cared for that ship. I cared for her from the first moment I saw her lying somnolently among the rusting hulks in the graveyard near Canalopolis.

Remember, this was a long time ago. Even then, the old timer of the Mojave yards must have been fifteen years dead and gone. Canalopolis was a desert outpost on the edge of Syrtis Major cowering under the lash of the everlasting sandstorms, but just then it was a boomtown.

A lot of the vital force had drained away from the urge to colonize when Mars and Venus had turned out to be so inhospitable. That's why there were old ships and to spare in the Canalopolis yards. It looked as though the outward flood of humanity had reached its limit. The Asteroid Belt made deep space too dangerous to reach for mere colonization. A catalyst was needed.

It was supplied when Carvel's exploratory crew reached Europa and found gold.

Gold! In the same way that the cry from Sutter's Mill had brought a flood of new life out to the wilderness that was California centuries back, so Carvel's news brought men out from Terra to seek their fortunes in the darkness of deep space . . . on that tiny, unknown world spinning close to the bosom of mighty Jupiter.

The ink on my Master's ticket was barely dry when I jumped the Centurion as she droppd gravs at Canalopolis. I was set for a ship of my own. With a few carefully hoarded dollars in my overalls and a lot of brass I figured that I could get me a command. A few trips through the Belt would put me in velvet. Of course, I new it was dangerous and uncharted, but the canal city was full of grizzled sourdoughs and eager youngsters all willing to pay plenty for transport to Europa. I figured I couldn't miss.

That's where the R. S. Clementine came in. I bought her with a few dollars cash and a whole lot of credit. During those hectic days a man with a space pilot's lic-

ense and a Master's rating could just about write his own ticket.

I signed a note for fifty thousand and took possession of the ship. The fueling took five thousand . . . inerted plutonium came high on Mars, and the victualling took another two thousand. It didn't bother me. Ink and paper were cheap enough.

Then I spent two days rounding up a crew on a share and share alike basis, and another day lining up fifty passengers at two thousand a head. I was in business.

My Second Officer was a grizzled old rum-dum called Swanson. He was a laconic old soul who loved spacing only a jot better than he loved Martian alky. But he was a sharp man for the firing consoles; I never knew a better one.

I was lucky to get a physicist, too, though it turned out unlucky for him. He was a green youngster just out of Cal Tech who fell prey to the gold fever and found himself stranded on Mars a few million miles from the lode. I talked him into signing on for a minimum of three trips on the promise that his share of the take would make him a fine grub-stake out on Europa. When I think of it now, I feel as though I personally killed him. He didn't want to help crew Clem, but he was on the spot and I talked him into it. Green as grass he was. But he had brains. Brains for working atomics . . . nothing else. Holcomb, his name was. I'll never forget it.

The R. S. Clementine . . . it was shortened to Clem even before takeoff . . . was an atomic multiple pulse three hundred footer. The pile that drove her was housed in a long sheathed tube shaft that ran from just aft of the Control deck to the nozzles along her longitudinal axis. It was an inefficient system, but to me it looked like pure beauty. After all, she was my first command.

At 22/30 on 2/13/49 Mars date, we blasted off for Europa with fifty passengers, nine crewmen and a hold full of mining equipment. In that three hundred foot hull we were like sardines packed in a can. Sure, it was profiteering, but have you ever seen prosperity without it?

3-Planet-Spring

THE trip out was almost too uneventful. We found a clear channel through the Belt and came through without a change of course. In those days no one had ever heard of deflectors, and a free passage through the Belt was a one in a thousand chance. Yet, being young and a bit cocky, I was willing to attribute it to my own spacemanship. I imagined that the trip back would be even easier.

The greeting we got at Europa didn't do much to teach me humility, either. Not many ships were getting through, and those miners wine and dined us in true frontier style.

It took six hours to unload our passengers and their gear, and another hour to round up a payload for the hop back to Mars. It was mostly ore and mail, but we did get two passengers.

We refueled out on the airless, rocky plain that served Europa as a space yard. Jupiter seemed to fill the sky. Deep space was a new experience to us and never had we grounded on a planet or moon so near to so large a primary. There were several cases of vertigo caused by the crazy feeling that we were upside down when we looked up at that hellishly big orb in the sky. That was one of the everpresent dangers on Europa. Enough of it and you found your mind going.

One passenger was a miner that cracked like that. The other was an attendant from the Triplanetary Medical Mission that had established a small base on the moonlet. In other words, his keeper.

The psycho came aboard in a straight-jacket and a blank bewildered look twisted his face as he climbed woodenly into the ventral valve. The attendant didn't look a great deal saner. Still, I was supremely confident, and my passenger's afflictions didn't worry me at all.

I was busily counting my imaginary profits as soon as we blasted free. To say that I was pleased with myself would be an understatement. Clem sought the sky like the proverbial homesick angel, her atomics throbbing beautifully under the care of Holcomb and his tube gang. Swanson and I set her into a hyperbolic trajectory with a couple of flourishes of the graphites and Jupiter moved into the

proper position dead astern. It was all too easy. . . .

A week passed before we crossed the outermost periphery of the Belt. Clem slipped between two small-sized mountains and we were in. For several hours the screens showed clear sky, and then came the deluge! There was no one in a thousand clear channel waiting for us this time. I learned what crossing the Belt really meant, but fast. Swanson and I sat at the consoles, eyes glued to the screens, sweat oozing off our ribs. Icy sweat, smelling of fear.

Clem shuddered and jolted as we slammed her about, twisting and dodging as those chunks of rock came hurtling at us out of nowhere. Hour after wrenching hour it continued, until we ached all over from the beating we were taking.

We were almost through when the hatch behind us flew open with a crash, and a screeching, wailing mass of humanity threw itself upon us! In a flash I knew what had happened. The jolting of the ship must have knocked the attendant out and the crazy miner had somehow managed to free himself. He'd found his way to the Control deck, sobbing with mixed rage and terror. He connected the gyrations of the ship with the men who were handling her and he was wild with terrified fury. For five hideous minutes Swanson and I struggled with him, trying to protect ourselves and at the same time keep Clem away from those ever-present asteroids that swam continuously into the range of the screens!

Finally, Swanson got a clear shot at him with one of those ham-like fists of his and the psycho banged backward across the Control, his head crashing with sickening force into the sharp edge of the pressure-suit lockers. He oozed down to the floor-plates like a sack of wet mush. I knew without touching him that he was dead. . . .

But the damage had been done. The ship had blasted around so that she was slewing sideways to the axis of her trajectory and in no position to maneuver. I leaped for the firing consoles as I caught sight of a small asteroid spinning in toward us. I caught the proper key, but

I was too late. There was a rending, tearing crash as the missile sliced into Clem's flank. The lights flickered and went out, and there was a whoosing sound as air gushed from the ruptured compartments. The automatic damage control system cut in then, and there was the sound of airtight doors banging shut throughout the ship. The glowing meters on the panels danced crazily, and the power dial's needle banged hard against the peg and back to zero in one movement. Then there was silence. Clem was dead in space. . . .

FOR a few stunned moments Swanson and I sat on the deck staring at one another. There was an expression of shocked disbelief on the rummy's face. There was one on mine, too, I know. No matter how many times you brush with the violent ending, no human mind can accept the true inevitability of unsolicited death. We can't ever really accept the fact that "this is it!" Always some corner of our minds keeps thinking that the end is not yet.

That's the way it was with us. We simply did not believe the thing that had happened to us. Our ship was a pierced derelict and we stood practically no chance of getting through now, but we couldn't accept it.

A semblance of sanity returned and Swanson dragged two pressure suits out of the locker. In tight silence we donned them and started for the locked hatch. I had no idea just how badly Clem was hurt, but hope always remains after everything else is gone, so I had to find out.

We forced the hatch and watched the air vanish in an icy cloud down the dark corridor. The break in the hull was large. I knew, because the sonar in my suit didn't pick up any hissing.

The tube shaft with its precious pile was our objective. If that was unhurt, there was still a chance. Fortunately we had been almost through the Belt when the collision came, so except for an occasional small bit of rock banging against the hull, space around us was clear.

On the way down toward the shaft we looked in on the medic. He was dead

from asphyxiation, his face blue and bloated with internal pressure. The psycho had jammed the airtight hatch of their compartment with a piece of luggage so that the safety device had failed when the air went.

We left him there and continued down the companionway. After a bit, we met three pressure suited figures, and I breathed easier. It was Holcomb and two of his crew from the shaft. Off watch, they'd been in the forecastle when the asteroid hit. Now they were trying to force their way into the shaft through a badly warped and fused hatch.

From the condition of the walls and deck-plates, I could see that we must be very near the spot where the missile cut into the ship. And even out where we were our wrist-geigs were clicking pettishly, showing that the thing had hit on or at least near the pile. Near enough to warp the insulating plates.

I sent Swanson and one of the tubemen down to the equipment locker for torches, and as soon as they returned, we began cutting into the shaft. Even with atomic torches it took us a long time, because those walls were foot-thick leaded steelumin.

Finally the glowing section of hatch fell away and a wave of vertigo swept over me. It seemed that I was about to step through the cutaway into eternity. Close to the hatch was a jagged hole that knifed through one half the ship's girth from the shaft to free space. It was as though a mighty hand had punched a steel forefinger halfway through a cylinder made of butter. The jagged edges of the hole were fused and melted into grotesque stalactites. And beyond gleamed the stars against a backdrop of diffuse nebulosity that was the Milky Way. As we watched, they moved lazily across the irregular patch of sky. Clem was turning slowly on her axis, one with the mindless drift of the cosmic dust cloud that was the Belt.

I stepped through into the shaft. The damage had to be ascertained, for the three lifeships would never take us all the way into Mars. They were not atomic and their range was sharply limited . . . five hundred thousand miles at most.

The remains of the asteroid was a congealed mass of aa filling the lower end of the shaft, and bits of machinery and shards of plating were scattered about the deck. The tubemen who had been in the shaft at the time of collision might have been the charred lumps stuck to the wall-plates . . . I didn't want to know.

The pile itself had been ripped open in one place, and a threatening glow emanated from the torn place setting our geigs whirring. I knew we could stand the radiation in small dosages, since our suits were insulated. But not for long. Repairs had to be made quickly . . . if they could be made at all.

Using the pieces of plating that lay about, Holcomb, Swanson and I set about mending the break with the torch.

THAT was the first time I became conscious of the strangeness. Not many men even today have looked into a plutonium pile. It was eery, that light within. It was like . . . well . . . like the essence of life. Mindless, unknowing, but vibrantly alive beyond any human comparison.

The break was almost healed when the . . . the thing . . . happened. I don't know of any other way to express it. The slow rotation of the ship brought the hole in her side into line with the Sun . . . and for a long moment the brilliant light burned down on us . . . and into the pile.

In that timeless minute I felt the interplay of forces greater than the human mind can conceive. The pile and the Sun glared at one another. There is no other way it can be said. They *looked* at each other . . . and something happened. The Sun called to that mindless life that was the essence of Clem . . . and she answered! She did! And all the others felt it too! In that instant the atomic fire in Clem's heart . . . that fire spawned of the Sun . . . awoke! And there was *oneness*!

The sunbeam passed and darkness fell once again in the shaft. All of us stood about in silence. All of us convinced of what we had seen and felt, and yet each afraid to give voice to it. Colloidal life is too vain, somehow, to admit another, more vital sort of life into our neat little

cosmos. Even when the proof of it happens before your eyes, you pass it off as . . . imagination. We did. Or tried. The pile subsided into a sullen glow, and we pushed the thing from our minds. We had *seen* nothing. And men in danger are sometimes confused. That's the way we rationalized it.

Quickly, then, we finished the repairs and Holcomb tested for power. The meter snapped to life eagerly. We had our ship again and we could proceed. An hour before we had felt doomed, but now Mars and safety seemed near at hand.

The passengers, of course, were both dead. Three tubemen had perished in the shaft. That left six crewmen and three officers. And Clem . . .

We retreated from the shaft because of the radiation that still leaked through the sprung shielding, and somehow or other all of us managed to stay out for the next two weeks.

Living in suits was hard on the nerves. One doesn't often think of all the inconveniences involved. But having your beard grow in your helmet, for instance, where you can't get at it to use depilatory, is hard to take. Even the most elementary body functions become fantastically complicated. And the result is always shattered nerves. But the terrific breach in the hull made it necessary. Only the Control deck¹ was truly airtight after the collision, and the men were quarreling continuously about who should get the long watches there. Then too, every time the hatch was opened, new air had to be pumped in and the pressure tanks were dangerously low.

That's why we called it imagination born of jangled nerves when we began to notice a difference in the way the ship handled. There was a certain recalcitrant sluggishness about her responses to course corrections, and she showed a marked preference for sunward trajectories rather than for the hyperbolics I computed Marsward. Yet we chose to ignore all the symptoms.

On the fifteenth "day" after the collision, I was in the dorsal blister checking our position by means of bubble-tetrant and star shots. Mars already had begun to

show a definite disc, and I felt better than I had in days. My flight of fancy was short-lived.

Three sights told me that we were off course. Unaccountably, of course, for we had made no major corrections in the last week. Instead of pointing at the spot in space where we would intercept Mars, we were five degrees sunward.

I triggered my suit radio and called to Swanson in Control.

"Swanson here, Captain," his voice came back in my ear phones.

"We are five degrees sunward of our plotted course, Swanson," I said. "Correct immediately."

He sounded miffed as he replied: "Mars is right in the crosshairs of the course scope, Sir. Right where she's been for the last week . . ."

I told him to stand by and checked my star-sights again. I had made no error. We were a full five degrees off course, and the deviation was growing larger momentarily. I could easily detect it with my tetrant out here in the seldom used blister, yet in the course-scope in Control Mars showed centered in the crosshairs. Why? Even as I asked myself that question my mind flashed back to the awful moment in the tube-shaft. Almost wildly, I thrust the thought away from me. Yet if that *thing* I had felt really lived and was intelligent . . . could it control the images that showed in instruments that were an integral part of the ship . . . of its own body? Could it control those so that such an error as this could not be discovered except by the off chance that someone should make a direct check with starsights outside the ship itself? There was a craftiness about the disparity that frightened me.

I forced myself to relax and I laughed half-heartedly at my imaginings. The weeks spent living under trying conditions in a crippled ship had made me susceptible to vaporings. I gave Swanson the correction again.

"There must be something wrong with the scope relays, Swanson. Maybe the jar of the crash bollixed them," I said. "Correct with five point five to port. Plane is okay."

"Aye, Sir," grumbled Swanson.

I laid the tetrant in its rack and turned to leave the blister just as the ship began to throb under the impact of the correcting thrust from the nozzles. I glanced back over my shoulder for a last look at the sky, and . . .

The hair on the nape of my neck stood erect!

INSTEAD of correcting the course, the blast had veered Clem's nose a full ten degrees farther to starboard so that she pointed straight at the Sun!

My voice was shaky as I called Control again. "Swanson, you rummy! You gave her starboard blast instead of port! Damn it man! You've taken us another ten degrees farther off arc!"

"But Captain!" protested Swanson, "I gave her what you ordered!"

"I ordered five point five to port!" I shouted angrily.

"I gave her five point five to Port!" Swanson howled.

Holcomb cut into the conversation from his metering station near the shaft. He sounded shaky with fright. "He . . . he . . . called for five five . . . to port, Captain, and that's what I . . . I gave him! But something's . . . wrong! She's not responding.

"Cut all power!" I ordered sharply. "We'll have to check all the controls."

There was a moment of tense silence before Holcomb's voice came back, more frightened than before. "She won't cut off! I can't kill the drive! She's got . . . the . . . bit in her teeth, and . . .

"Holcomb!" My voice filled the plexiglas bubble of my helmet. I was afraid the youngster was going to say the very thing I had been thinking a few moments before and I didn't want to hear it.

The physicist subsided for a minute, and Swanson cut in. "Mars shows properly in the course-scope now, Captain! Way off to one side!"

Holcomb's laugh made cold chills run up and down my backbone. "She doesn't care now!" he bubbled, "She doesn't care if we know now . . . because we can't control her! She . . . She's going home . . . and we can stop her!"

I dove through the blister hatch and ran down the ramp toward the metering station shouting for Swanson to get into a suit and join me there. Fear followed me like a writhing black shade down the dark companionways. I was afraid for Holcomb's mind, and I was afraid of something else. Something that had no name or shape. I was afraid of Clem . . . of the thing I knew for certain now she had become.

When I reached Holcomb he was calm. His outburst seemed to have sobered him, and for that, at least, I could be thankful.

We waited for Swanson to join us, and then we went into the shaft. Soberly, we stood near the pile, feeling the strangeness of the alien life that lived as hellish atomic fire in the shielded tube nearby. We could feel a probing in our minds, alien fingers fishing about curiously, but with cautious reserve of . . . a precocious child.

It was Swanson who put it into words finally. Simple, prosaic words. "The blinkin' can has come alive!" he muttered. That tore it. Swanson hadn't an imaginative bone in his body, and if he felt it . . . it was.

My mind flashed back across the years to the old man of the Mojave yards and his stories about living ships. The living thing that was the Sun, the thing that had given birth to Clem's soul had gleamed in on that soul through the break in the plates, and in doing that it had posed on Clem awareness. Awareness that she was part of the mighty life stream of the cosmos . . . part of the living fires of the stars. In a way that human minds could but dimly grasp, the Sun had spoken to Clem . . . called her. And *this* was the result. . . .

Understand . . . there was nothing malign about her . . . not just then. She was almost childlike. Pure, brilliant, willful . . .

We jerry-rigged a control set right there in that shaft, hoping to cut across the linkages from the top deck; but it was futile. I had the insane notion that she was laughing at us and our pestering efforts to re-establish dominance over her.

We tried withholding fuel, but that was

no good. There was enough plutonium already in the pile to take us across the system. Certainly enough to take us where she wanted to go. We didn't want to guess about that!

Holcomb and I tried slipping the cadmium emergency dampers into the pile. The first one slipped in easily. But the moment the drop in activity registered, the second rod fused in the slip shaft. It was the same with all the rest. We could not insert them. Clem would not be anesthetized. She was protecting herself . . . calmly, almost reproachfully. I really believe she was learning about men and their will to command even things they can never really understand.

THAT'S the way it went. If the crossing of the Belt has been nightmarish, the next weeks were insane. Our every attempt to re-establish control was thwarted easily by the mind in the pile. Mars fell astern and Clem swung inward toward the Sun. For a while Terra blazed green and bright off our starboard bow, almost at eastern quadrature. Then she, too, began to fade behind us as the possessed ship drove ever Sunward.

I think we were all a little mad during those terrible days. We lived with the knowledge that we were helplessly at the mercy of the ship. Gradually we admitted to ourselves where she was taking us. We realized where "home" was . . .

We took to sitting dully in the Control room, still clad in suits that we were too lethargic to remove, and staring at the silvery disc of Venus that daily grew larger in the forward screens.

We were sitting so when the tension broke Holcomb. One minute he was as morosely silent as the rest of us, and the next he had seized a spanner and burst screaming out of the room.

His voice was like nothing human. "I won't let her do it!" he was shrieking. "I won't let her take me!"

Automatically, the rest of us got to our feet and started after him. It was as though none of us really cared, but we felt that we should do something. Just what, no one seemed to have figured out. We clumped heavily down the compan-

ways after him toward the open hatch that led to the tube shaft. In our helmet radios his voice was a continuous tinny and distorted harangue.

"The Sun! The Sun! She's going to it. It called her and she's going to it! But she won't take me!" and then laughing wildly, the gibbering mirth of a madman.

His laughter woke me. "Holcomb!" I yelled, "Come back!" Jammed in the narrow corridor, we struggled after him.

"She won't take me! I won't let her take me!" Holcomb was screaming. "I'll kill her! I'll tear the rotten life out of her! Kill! Kill her!"

We reached the hatchway in time to see the crazed physicist tearing at the moorings of the pile with his spanner. Already he had one of the safety latches loose and was banging furiously at the second. Instinctively, we reeled back, for our wrist geigs whirled as deadly amounts of radiation fanned out from the bent housing. Holcomb, bathed in a rain of invisible death, was too engrossed in tearing the last latch free. The latch that would free the pile and send it spilling out of the nozzles into space.

Then Clem struck. How can I describe the horror of it? Insensate metal came to life . . . became enraged. And it killed. Deliberately and without conscience. The overhead crane that carried the plutonium ingots to the pile moved. It swung its claw down to pick up a sharp shard of steel that lay on the deck. Like a hand, it picked it up . . . aimed . . . struck!

Edge first, the jagged fragment caught Holcomb across the shoulders, shearing his slender body in two and leaving the two uneven halves twitching on the dark floor. An aura of pure, ravening hate filled the shaft. Clem had showed her teeth.

Swanson laughed, and the sound chilled me. I knew then that we were all going mad. The intricate system of checks and balances that nature built into our brains could not stand another hour of this.

I slapped Swanson's face with my gloved hand and he stopped laughing, but his face was a frozen, distorted thing. I knew mine was the same, for utter terror was choking the breath from me, and I wanted to run screaming from the terrible

hate that filled the shaft and from the bloody, mangled thing on the deck.

I managed to make my voice understandable only by biting hard on my lips until the pain steadied me. I gave the order to abandon ship. With only a little luck we could make Venusport, but I would have abandoned ship if we had been halfway between here and Centaurus.

I divided the men into three groups. Two men and an officer to each lifeship except the last. Two tubemen alone in that one. I took the controls of the first one myself after setting the finders of the other two on my own ship so that I could do the astrogation for all three. Then without another look at our accursed ship, we slammed out of the jetisoning valve into free space.

The cool stars and the nearby silvery disc of Venus calmed me somewhat. The tremendous vistas of space were something familiar and real. And we were free . . .

But we had bargained without Clem. The encounter with young Holcomb had changed her. He had tried to kill her . . . tried to sunder her body. The childish core of her had become that hateful thing we had felt in the shaft. She had been attacked and her reaction was quick and dreadful.

ALMOST before we were out of her shadow, she turned in an impossibly short arc and charged us, atomic hell blazing from her tail. Like a vengeful comet, she sought us out.

I called to the other ships to scatter and they leaped away from us like arrows. One went up and to starboard, the other went down and to port. I gave my own tiny boat full throttle and headed straight for the bright crescent of Venus.

Clem would not be denied. One of the lifeships was caught in her tail-flare and I saw it vanish in an incandescent blot as the heat detonated the tank of monoatomic hydrogen it carried. Debris fanned out from the scene of the explosion, banging against our ship's flanks.

And still the infuriated metal monster was not satisfied. She caught the second lifeship . . . Swanson's . . . about fifty

miles astern of us and gored it to death with her needle-sharp prow.

Clem swung in a wide circle and bore down on us. At her speed I knew she would run us down in seconds, and there was nothing left to do. I closed my eyes and waited.

Death did not come. Instead there was a wave of something like emotion. It was disgust and impatience and sharp command. A mighty . . . *something* . . . was talking . . . not to us . . . and not in words or even symbols we could truly understand. But the power of it was so great that we could catch the overtones, the emotional nuances that sur-charged it. Something was talking to Clem . . . commanding her to forget her childish wrath and . . . COME!

As though jerked around by a cosmic leash, the crazed ship veered about, her tail flare blinding us. When we could see again, she was a spark far Sunward and driving at incredible speed.

In tight silence, the two crewmen and I watched her for hours until she vanished into the bright glare of the Sun. After that we followed her with the radar, eyes intent on the golden blip steadily moving inward toward the yellow mass of Sol. We drifted in space, just watching and waiting. And then at last the fleck of golden light blended with the Sun.

I knew even as I watched her that she did not die. No. There was maturity and satisfaction and ineffable pleasure flooding out from the spot where she vanished . . . but no nuance of death!

We turned away, emptied of emotion or even thought. In a numb trance we found our way into Venusport. We did not explain. By unspoken consent we said nothing about the thing we had witnessed. It was too new, too fresh. And it was too unlike life as we know it. The port authorities listed us as shipwrecked by collision with an errant asteroid, and we got passage back to Terra . . . and sanity.

It was a long time before I ventured into space again. And every time I look up at the Sun I have the feeling that I have seen something no human should.

I saw Clem go home.



"You are the next sacrifice—I!"

MOON OF MADNESS

By **GEORGE WHITLEY**

Hurting toward that coldly gleaming disc, they thought in terms of thrust and trajectory, deceleration and orbit. They had no time for an old wives' tale.

IT SEEMS STRANGE, NOW, TO hear all this talk about jet propulsion and rockets. Especially rockets. Why, some of the more daring journalists have even toyed with the idea that we may, one distant day, even reach the Moon! But they probably aren't serious.

But it seems that, at last, I can tell the story of James Taberner, as he told it to

me. People will be more ready to listen—now; perhaps some will even believe. Mind you, I didn't quite believe it myself when I first heard it, but now—I suppose I do.

Yes, this is the story of James Taberner, Extra Master, Navigator of the first rocket ship. And it is the story of Dr. Malcolm Stornsen, the man who discov-

ered how to tap and harness atomic power, the man who did it with only one end in view—to reach the stars. And it is the story of John Bruce, the Engineer, whose dour materialism was merely a veneer over an equally dour Calvinism which, in turn, hid a streak of barbaric superstition.

You may remember the name of Stornsen. It used to crop up now and again in the papers, some years before the War, in connection with his atomic energy experiments. He never hit the headlines till he blew himself up, himself and his two assistants. Their names, you may remember, were Taberner and Bruce. Yes, they *did* blow themselves up, a helluva long way.

BUT, as far as I'm concerned, the story really begins one December morning about eight years ago. I was Third Mate of the old *Ballygunge* at the time, and we were wandering round from Calcutta to Bombay with a load of black diamonds. This particular morning we were about off Aleppi, the coast was visible as a line of blue haze to starboard.

I was strolling back and forth on the bridge, mentally calculating how much money I could safely draw in Bombay, when I saw something small and black right ahead. There was no need to speculate as to its identity, the only thing it could be was one of the dugout canoes used by the local fishermen. It did not seem to be moving, so I gave the order to starboard five degrees.

Moved by a spirit of idle curiosity, nothing else, I took the telescope from its rack to look at the boat and its occupant. What I saw made me hasten to the Captain's voice-pipe and blow a hearty blast on its whistle. "Will you come up, sir?" I said. "We're approaching what appears to be a rubber dinghy of the kind they use in aeroplanes, and there's a man in the bottom, either dead or unconscious!"

The biggest surprise came after we had got the occupant of the little collapsible boat aboard. It was either Taberner, or his double. But Taberner, we knew, had left the Company, had left the sea, and had some kind of shore job near London. He was supposed to be acting as assistant to some crackpot Professor called Storn-

sen. Then somebody remembered that he had seen in the paper, before we left Calcutta, that Stornsen had blown himself and his two assistants to glory. Yes, it gave names, and Taberner's name was given. No, he wasn't sure of the date, it was a Home paper, not the *Statesman*.

So it couldn't be Taberner.

I remember the scene well, we were all in the little sick bay arguing the point, when the rescued man opened his eyes. He saw me, first. "Why, hello, Andy!" he whispered. "So *you* picked me up!" His eyes flickered past me, found Captain Morgan. "You here too, sir? Quite a gathering of old shipmates!"

"But I thought you were ashore in London . . ." I began.

"Don't bother the patient, Mr. Dunstan," frowned the Old Man. "Rest he needs, and quiet. Get out of here, all of you!"

Taberner raised an emaciated hand.

"Please, Captain Morgan. I *want* to talk, badly. I've been alone, *alone*, do you understand? Out there in the blackness and emptiness, where there's no sea, no wind, no rain, only the naked, cold stars. I must talk, I must tell the story while there is time. Something might happen to me, and then nobody would know. Nobody would ever know, till the next fools fall into the same trap that snared us.

"And, in any case, I hate to think that all the toil and ingenuity of Stornsen has perished unrecorded. He was the first, we were the first . . ."

His voice tailed off as he muttered something about "we were the first that ever burst into that silent sea . . ."

Then, he regained control of himself, and this is his story.

TABERNER first met Stornsen when he was Second Officer of *Maharanee of Oudh*. The *Maharanee* had called in at Colombo on her homeward passage, a matter of a small parcel of cargo, mostly tea, and a few passengers. Stornsen was one of the passengers. It seems strange, to me, that Stornsen wasn't sitting at the Captain's table, but it is probable that the Colombo agent just didn't know who Stornsen was, and thought that his title denoted

a degree in medicine. 'Anyhow, he was put at Taberner's table.

You just can't keep a man from riding his hobby horse. Stornsen rode his, every mealtime. Not that he looked, said Taberner, like a monomaniac, or even like the conventional, absent-minded Professor of fiction. He suited his name, big, and blond, and Scandinavian. He would have passed as the Mate of a Norwegian whaler. An interesting contrast, it must have been; Stornsen, the scientist, big, blond and hearty, and Taberner, the ship's officer, small, dark and clever looking.

Taberner was the only one at the table who could appreciate Stornsen's conversation. But then, he was always a clever beggar, and had his Extra Master's Ticket; which, of course, implies that he was very well up in math. And his nickname in the Company was always "Professor." So Stornsen and Taberner talked about escape velocities, acceleration, deceleration, electrons, protons, neutrons and positrons, much to the disgust of the other passengers. They were, said Taberner, the usual bunch you get in Colombo, Tea, I. C. S., Army and such, and interested only in bar hours.

A week or so before the *Maharanee* docked at Tilbury, Stornsen had asked Taberner to become his assistant. Taberner agreed, as by this time the scientist had fired his imagination. So he handed in his resignation. The Company, he said, were very decent about it, and told him that he could come back any time he liked without losing any seniority. But he never thought that he'd ever set foot aboard one of their ships again.

Stornsen had another assistant, a Scot called John Bruce. "I never really liked him," said Taberner, "and yet, I was sorry for him. You could tell that one part of him was intensely engrossed in the work he was doing, whilst another part disapproved most intensely. He wasn't happy in his work."

But Bruce, it appears, was a first class engineer, and the three of them toiled like galley slaves in the workshops that Stornsen had installed in the grounds of his house on the Essex coast. They employed outside labour, of course, but this labour

was never allowed to know what it was they were helping to build. Taberner and Bruce, naturally, had been let into the secret. They were building a rocketship.

He must have been an amazing man, Stornsen. He found the key to unlock the limitless power imprisoned with the atom, but he was completely blind to its commercial possibilities. His one dream was the conquest of the planets. A favourite saying of his, said Taberner, was—"Just as the aeroplane had to await the internal combustion engine before it became practicable, so did the rocketship have to await atomic power."

Stornsen and his two assistants put the finishing touches to "*Argonaut*" (for so they had decided to call her) themselves. She was a lovely thing, said Taberner. Stornsen hadn't followed the conventional design of a glorified artillery projectile with four big vanes aft, or at the base. *Argonaut* was shaped more like a huge flatfish, or, better still, like an enormous arrowhead. Yes, an arrowhead is perhaps the better comparison, as one can just imagine her shooting to the stars on her shaft of flame. This shape, said Taberner, made her easy to handle in an atmosphere. With atomic power to play with, there was no need to consider the clumsy expedient of landing stern first, on the main drive.

AT LAST came the big night. Stornsen's domestic staff had been given leave, and there were only the three astronauts on the premises. They wheeled *Argonaut* out from her hangar, managed after much jockeying with the little, but enormously powerful, mobile cranes which they themselves had constructed, to get her on to her launching ways.

They entered through the airlock, then went to their stations; Stornsen and Taberner to the Control Room forward, at the point of the arrow, and Bruce to his engines aft.

I don't think that any of them, Stornsen included, quite knew what was going to happen when the main drive was switched on. But she took off as sweetly as a bird, and soared into the air long before she reached the end of the runway. Having power to play with and to spare, there was

no need, Taberner said, to reach escape velocity almost immediately. The take-off was no worse than it would have been in the case of a conventional aeroplane.

Both of them, however, were worried when the buzzer of the engineroom telephone sounded. And both of them were relieved when they discovered that the disaster that Bruce was reporting was, by this time, many miles astern. It appears that a few drums of the very unstable fuel used by *Argonaut* had been left in the hangar. Radiations from the main drive must have set them off; anyhow, Bruce reported having seen from the after viewports the house and workshops going up in one, glorious explosion. But nobody worried much. The ship was sound, was behaving perfectly, and the Moon lay ahead.

Actually, the run to the Moon could have been accomplished in a far shorter space of time, but, as soon as escape velocity was reached, Stornsen cut the main drive. He wanted to test out the orbit worked out for rockets propelled by chemical fuel, and, also, wished to find out the effect of weightlessness on the human body. It was nauseating at first, but, as soon as the effects wore off, was rather pleasant.

The Moon was just past the full when *Argonaut* blasted off.

Rather amusing, that. The three astronauts had been telling themselves that they'd be the first men to see the Other Side of the Moon, and they deliberately went there when that side of our satellite was in darkness. But, in spite of the darkness, they saw that which caused them to throw the power into the braking jets and come down to a landing.

It wasn't easy, that landing, except on paper.

Everything was worked out nicely, the radar was switched on to give them warning of mountain peaks or crater rims. Only one thing had been neglected in their calculations—air resistance. Oh, they finally tumbled to it, and then spiralled down, and down, and down to make a landing close, but not too close, to the lights they had seen.

It was a good landing. The flares and

the searchlights helped, and the place where they finally touched down was as smooth, as the proverbial billiard table, but, still, it was a good landing. You must remember that *Argonaut* was the first of her kind, and that her crew were having to learn things the hard way, as they went along.

John Bruce came along from aft, wiping his hands on a piece of waste. "Well, we made it," he said, but he didn't, said Taberner, look too happy about it.

"What's biting you, John?" asked Stornsen.

"Well, Doctor, this sounds crazy, I know. But I served my time on the Clyde, and we always used to say that if a ship wasn't christened with a bottle of wine she'd . . ."

He paused, and ran his hand through his thinning, sandy hair.

"Well?"

"If she didn't have her drink of wine at the launching, she'd have her drink later. Only it would be blood."

"Rubbish, John!"

"Ay, you may call it rubbish. But this, for a maiden voyage, has been far too easy, too smooth-running. Mark my words, she'll have her drink before this trip is out. I only hope it's not ours."

THIS, naturally, was hardly conducive to the peace of mind of Stornsen and Taberner. They weren't superstitious, but they knew that, as long as there is any believer in any particular superstition around, his beliefs are liable to be justified. Anyhow, they did their best to laugh it off, and Stornsen proposed that the three of them had *their* drink to celebrate their safe arrival.

Then Taberner busied himself with figures. As near as he could reckon, he told them, the dawn would be in about three hours' time. They had come down near the edge of daylight. Meanwhile, Stornsen had busied himself taking samples of the Lunar atmosphere. It was rather thin, he announced, but quite rich in oxygen. None of them seems to have been foolish enough to propose leaving the ship before light, so they just sat around and smoked and waited, "keeping a lookout of sorts

through the control room viewports. They were confident that their ship would withstand anything short of artillery fire, so weren't overly anxious regarding any possible hostile action by the natives. Yes, said Taberner, they were all convinced, somehow, that there *were* natives.

At last came the first, faint streamers of light in the east. Silhouetted against the paling sky was what appeared to be the rim of an enormous crater, along which were black shapes, pylons and low, squat buildings, far too regular in appearance to have been the work of natural forces.

Abruptly, the sun's rim topped the crater wall. A long beam of golden light streamed across the level, grey-green plain, scintillating on the hoar frost crystals that spangled the fronds of the tall, feathery vegetation. To the westward, in the direction in which they had seen the lights before their landing, half seen buildings loomed huge and mysterious through the morning mist.

"This side of the Moon must be one, huge crater," said Stornsen. "Think of it, an atmosphere, vegetation, intelligent life! Get your gear, both of you, and we'll explore!"

He should have known, said Taberner, that this insanely imprudent suggestion from the level-headed Stornsen was the first warning of danger. He began to expostulate, to point out that one man should be left to stand by the ship, and in the middle of his protests found himself buckling on his belt with its forty-five Colt and cartridges, slinging over his shoulder the strap from which hung the little cine-camera. "And I never took a single picture!" he said, bitterly.

"Look!" said Bruce, pointing, "here comes the reception committee!"

THE explorers had been prepared for all kinds of alien monstrosities, but what they saw was far more amazing than any glorified reptile or insect would have been. Advancing over the plain in single file came a long line of what were, indubitably, human beings. As they came on through the last, fast dissipating wraiths of mist it was hard to tell whether they were marching or dancing. The three men

fought for a place at the high-powered, mounted telescope. When, at last, Taberner got his turn, he saw that they were indeed dancing, advancing slowly with some kind of rhythmic shuffle that impressed him, somehow, as having a ritual significance.

The Selenites, he saw, were indeed human, rather taller, perhaps, than the average by Earth standards. Their skin was of a coppery colour, as he could judge with ease, as their only garments appeared to be a very abbreviated apron and an elaborate, feathered headdress. And there was something wrong about them. No, not physically, for all were almost perfectly proportioned. Just something wrong. He took his eye from the eyepiece, thinking that, perhaps, the powerful lenses had induced some subtle distortion. But the sense of wrongness persisted.

In a remarkably short space of time (the shuffling dance couldn't have been as slow as it looked) the Moonmen had surrounded the rocketship. They made no hostile move, but flung themselves prostrate on the ground as though in worship.

"They take us for gods . . ." whispered Stornsen. "They take us for gods . . ."

His face illumined by some inner light, he strode to the airlock door. The engineer's face had the same expression, the expression one would find on the face of a being with the power of a deity and the limitations of human nature. Not a nice expression, said Taberner.

As he followed the other two, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the polished metal of the inner airlock door. A part of his mind realized, with an unpleasant start, that he, too, had been freed from the shackles of normal decency. And then his last mental defences went down before the mounting tide of insanity.

What followed was a nightmare. It was all a nightmare. And the most nightmarish part of it all, in retrospect, is that these three civilized human beings gloried in the obscene and bloody tribute paid them. That was the worst part . . .

It appears that the three explorers emerged from the rocketship and stood for a while drinking in the slavish adulation of the Moonmen, who, by this time,

had begun a low, eerie chant. And there were drums, said Taberner, and some kind of squealing flute. After a while, a native whose headress was larger and gaudier than any of the others, dared to approach the three Earthmen. He bowed low before them, and gestured toward the city, the while saying something in a low, harsh voice. Even though they could not understand the language, the implication was obvious. The gods were to be worshipped in their own temple.

So they set off.

STORNSEN surprisingly, took the lead. He was followed closely by Taberner and Bruce. It never occurred to them, said Taberner, to wait for one of the Selenites to guide them. Were they not gods?

Subconsciously, the three men had fallen into a shuffling gait. This was necessary, else, with the weak Lunar gravitation, every step would have been a leap. The pipes, or flutes, were now silent, but the little drums kept up a continuous, rhythmic, thud and rattle. The Earthmen found themselves stepping in time to the song of the drums, almost dancing. Behind them weaved and swayed the long line of their worshippers.

It seemed, said Taberner, that, before they reached the city, the level plain became rocky and uneven. But there was a road leading them through the distorted rocks, the jagged boulders, until they entered the city itself.

He had a fleeting impression of low, stone houses, of wide streets bordered with strange, exotic plants. Then Stornsen was leading them up flight after flight of stone stairs to the top of what must have been the largest building, a huge, truncated pyramid.

On its flat top was an altar, and three chairs, or thrones.

The scientist took the middle throne, the other two seated themselves, one on either side of him. Taberner was to remember, later, the carvings on these same thrones and on the high sides of the altar itself. They depicted scenes of obscene torture and cruelty. They were sickening, although, at the time, they seemed perfectly right and natural.

The Moonman with the gorgeous head-dress prostrated himself before the three gods from the sky, an example followed by the crowd who thronged the flat top of the pyramid. Then, they rose to their feet and began a low, not unmelodious chanting. The squeal of the pipes rose above the voices of the singers, and, a monotonous, inescapable background to all else was the thud and rattle of the little drums.

From the crowd lesser priests led forth the sacrifices. Old men were there, young girls, and children.

The first victim, a grey bearded patriarch, was seized by the attendant priests and stretched supine over the altar.

A knife glittered briefly in the bright rays of the sun, then plunged downward. The music of the drums rose to a deafening roar. The high priest tossed the first bloody offering at the feet of the gods from the sky, a human heart.

SO it went on. It would be nice to be able to say that, at last, the better natures of the three explorers reasserted themselves, and that they fought to put an end to the slaughter.

But Taberner was frank.

"As long as we were exposed to the emanations from the very soil," he said, "we weren't sane. There's something there, probably radioactive, that, when the sun shines upon it, drives men insane. It may account for the fact that, on Earth, lunatics have their worst spells at the time of the full moon.

"But we were mad, and our worshippers were mad.

"Oh, I know you'll say that the Moonmen would have been unaffected, being a race indigenous to their world. We thought of that. But, *men* on the Moon? They must have come from Earth some time in the remote past. And it is indeed strange that the carvings I saw on that pyramid were very similar to pictures I have seen of the decorations of Aztec temples in South America.

"No, what caused the break with our worshippers wasn't an appeal to our better instincts, but a breaking out of our animal ones . . ."

Bruce, it appears, had cast covetous eyes on one of the sacrifices. A young girl, she was, with a skin of gold and the figure of a Venus.

The high priest's knife was about to descend when Bruce jumped down from his throne and cried, "Stop!"

The priest didn't stop.

It is doubtful whether he would have stopped even had he understood.

The engineer stood for a moment, scowling.

Then he suddenly drew his revolver and shot the priest through the head.

When he shot the priest a second time, unnecessarily, the report of the forty-five sounded like the roar of a cannon; for the chanting had stopped, the noise of the pipes had stopped, and the little drums, at last, were silent.

As the priest fell, his keen knife slipped from his hand and flew forward, nicking Bruce's ankle just above his shoe. From the cut flowed blood, mingling with the blood which already covered the top of the pyramid with a slimy, red film.

The surviving priests muttered and whispered among themselves, pointing to the little wound. Evidently, the gods weren't supposed to bleed.

Then, brandishing their knives, they were upon the Earthmen.

Taberner and Stornsen drew their guns and opened fire, just in time to save the dazed and bewildered Bruce from being cut down as he stood.

It was a grim fight, there on the top of the pyramid temple under the blazing sun. The three explorers fired till their guns were empty, then snatched up knives and fought the mob steel to steel. The worst part of it was that the very people from whom they should have expected help, the prospective sacrifices, were their most vicious assailants.

One thing only was to their advantage, the relative muscular weakness of the Selenites. Even so, a razor-sharp blade in the hands of a physical weakling is deadlier than the brute strength of a strong man. Luckily, not all the Selenites were armed.

After what seemed an age of bloody struggle, the three men reached the base of the pyramid.

"To the ship!" shouted Stornsen, leaping far over the heads of the crowd that ringed him in. Then he was off, half striding, half leaping, setting a pace that none of the Moonmen could hope to match.

Taberner and Bruce followed his example, Taberner, at least, hoping (he still retained some shreds of sanity) that the scientist was leading them in the right direction.

IT WAS with distinct relief that he saw, when they came to the level plain, the mirror-bright hull of *Argonaut* gleaming in the distance.

The mob of priests, worshippers, and sacrifices was far outdistanced, but Bruce, looking behind, called out to attract the attention of his two companions. Streaming across the plain was a horde of little vehicles. And they were fast.

"We never saw where they were, or how they worked," said Taberner. "Or, if we did see, it wasn't with a sane portion of our minds. All I have is a confused impression of a mob of little, scurrying things, for all the world like cockroaches in a vermin-infested ship that have been suddenly disturbed."

But they reached the ship before their pursuers.

Luckily, no guards had been left, so they were able to board unmolested. There was no time for them to attend to each other's wounds, even had they been sufficiently sane to do so. Their one desire was to blast off from the surface of Luna with the utmost dispatch.

They had shut the airlock doors and were putting all in readiness for their departure when the Selenites arrived. They must have stopped their vehicles somewhere outside the limited radius of vision from the forward ports, for, said Taberner, they came on foot. In their hands they brandished clubs, knives, and even stones, with which they began to batter on *Argonaut's* hull.

It was nerve-wracking, said Taberner, in the Control Room. Through the ports they could see the crazed faces of the Selenites as they hammered on the incredibly tough, transparent plastic. On every face

was the same expression—whether its owner were youth or maiden, man or woman. An expression of literally devilish blood lust.

"Our own faces probably weren't too pretty, either," he said. He remembered that he and Stornsen snarled back at the mob like cornered beasts.

The light of the engine room telephone flashed.

"All ready," came Bruce's voice.

Then they could hear him singing in a cracked voice, a hymn, it was, but the words were interlarded with vile obscenities and blasphemies.

"What are you waiting for?" howled Bruce. "Surely you aren't scared of hurting these ————?"

Stornsen laughed, the laughter of a homicidal maniac.

Deliberately, he switched on the main drive.

Those Selenites aft must have been blown into eternity, those forward must have greased the ways with their bodies as *Argonaut* lurched ahead.

She lifted.

A few poor maniacs clung, miraculously, to the smooth hull. Taberner and Stornsen could see some of them through their ports. It was funny, very funny. They found themselves weak with laughter as the last Selenite, his features a mask of terror, dropped off to fall to the rocky surface of his world a mile below.

TABERNER could still remember the events that led to *Argonaut's* return to Earth.

He was dozing in the living quarters, a heavy, unhealthy sleep, broken by dreadful nightmares. In his dreams, he heard a terrible screaming. He half awoke, then turned over on his other side to sleep again. Suddenly, he jerked awake. In his poor, bemused brain was the certainty that the screams he had heard were not a dream.

He staggered into the engine room.

The shock of what he saw, he said, restored his sanity.

Lashed, supine, over the converter was Stornsen, like a victim stretched out on a sacrificial altar. The converter casing

must have been almost red-hot; anyhow, spirals of smoke rose from his garments and a smell of burning flesh filled the stagnant air. He must have suffered agonies before he died.

Yes, he was dead.

His throat was just a raw, gaping wound.

Like the high priest of some obscene religion Bruce cavorted about his engine-room.

"She didn't have her drink of wine when she was launched," he was shouting, "but she's had it now! Ay, she's had it now!"

He howled the last four words over and over like the chorus of some insane hymn.

Then—"We have sinned!" howled the engineer. "We have sinned! We have dared to venture beyond the bounds set by an all-wise Providence!"

He turned to face Taberner, his face contorted.

"But *I* am of the elect, *I* am destined to see Far Centaurus. But," his voice became a confidential whisper, "first they want another sacrifice. This one was for the Moon, it's not enough to take us to the stars . . ."

He advanced, cat-like, one hand behind his back.

"And do you know who the other sacrifice will be?" he asked. "*You* are the next sacrifice—I!"

It is, perhaps, symptomatic of the madness that had seized *Argonaut's* crew that none of them had changed their clothing since leaving the Moon. Taberner still wore his revolver belt. As Bruce whipped his bloody knife into view, he drew quickly and fired. He must, he said, have reloaded at some time or other, although he had no recollection of doing so.

Then Taberner came to himself, with the smoking gun in his hand, looking at the two corpses.

He dared hardly look at the fuel gauges, but his calculations showed that, with luck, he'd make it back to Earth. A lot depended on how long it took him to get her turned, to get her lined up to his satisfaction before he could begin his deceleration.

SO he juggled with the three flywheels (he said that, in a spaceship falling free, the ship turns in an exactly opposite direction to a wheel turned in its interior) and with his slide rule and tables.

He couldn't remember how much time he spent calculating and recalculating, until all that he could see through his sextant telescope was just a blur and the figures of his tables ran together.

He must have just slumped down over the navigator's desk and passed out.

When he awoke, it was to an unaccustomed feeling of weightlessness. The main drive had cut itself, for lack of fuel, and the ship was falling free. Feeling, to a certain extent, refreshed by his sleep, he rechecked his figures, found that *Argonaut* would make her grazing orbit with Earth. Taberner says that the accuracy of his calculations was due to sheer blind luck, but this I doubt. Whilst at sea he had the reputation of a wizard navigator.

His concern, now, was the amount of power left in the storage cells. These were located aft, in the engineroom. It may seem strange, but, said Taberner, he had completely forgotten about the two bodies he had left there. It came as a great shock when he saw Stornsen, with the gaping wound in his throat, bound across the converter, and the body of Bruce, a hole between his eyes and the back of his head missing, hanging, weightless, in the air.

Attracted by the mass of Taberner's body, the engineer's corpse drifted towards him, as though impelled by some kind of half life. For one horrible moment Taberner prepared himself for a struggle, then came to his senses and realized that Bruce could no longer do him, or anybody else, any harm.

At first he thought of shutting the engineroom door and bringing the bodies of his two shipmates home with him, then decided against it. Surely Stornsen, if the essence of the man still survived, somehow, would appreciate the honour of being the first of Earth's inhabitants to be buried in deep space.

If he put the bodies in the airlock, he reasoned, and then opened the outer door (these doors could be actuated from the

Control Room) the force of the atmosphere puffing out should blow them well clear of the ship.

He dealt with Stornsen first.

When he returned to the Control Room he said, in what he hoped was an impressive voice, as much as he could remember of the Burial Service for use at sea, and he found himself regretting that *Argonaut* carried no flags.

Bruce was next.

Whilst he was pulling the engineer's body along to the airlock, he felt something hard in his jacket pocket. Fighting down his revulsion, he put in his hand and pulled it out. It was a piece of rock, of a peculiar, crystalline formation. In the glow of the lights it glinted evilly, seemed to gleam with a life of its own. A piece of rock from the Moon.

With some hazy idea of bringing back evidence of *Argonaut's* voyage, Taberner kept the specimen. After the engineer's body had been consigned to the deep, he rummaged through various lockers until he found some lead foil. He never knew for what reason Stornsen had included it among the stores, but now, he thought, it was proving its worth. When the fragment of unknown mineral had been wrapped in many layers of the insulating material, Taberner stowed it in the locker in which he had found the foil. Although, he said, he knew, somehow, that now it was no longer exposed to the radiations of either the sun or the atomic power plant it was harmless.

He felt very hungry, went to the little galley and prepared a sketchy meal. Having eaten, he decided to return to Control and check his calculations yet again.

He never did so.

His reason, regained at such a cost, once again tottered on its foundations. Spreadeagled against the hull, his face pressed against one of the ports, was John Bruce.

LATER," said Taberner, "I was able to work things out. It was obvious, really. When I shot Stornsen into Space, there was enough pressure inside the ship, and inside the airlock, to blow him well clear. But, when I disposed of his body,

I lowered that pressure, considerably. And there wasn't enough to give Bruce escape velocity relative to our hull. So, he just drifted back.

"But, at the time, I thought he'd come back for me."

Taberner remembered times when he shunned the Control Room as though all the fiends of hell had taken residence there, other times when he talked to Bruce as to an old and trusted friend. He had no eyes for anything else but the corpse that sprawled outside.

Suddenly, he said, there was an appreciable shock. The deceleration flung him forward, as though to meet the man he had killed. A thin, screaming sound was briefly audible. And the body of Bruce had gone.

With the shock of returning sanity, Taberner realized that *Argonaut*, barely grazing Earth's atmospheric envelope, had made her first braking ellipse.

"Lovely she looked," he whispered, "green and blue and gold against the black of the eternal, barren night. A man's a fool who ever leaves her . . ."

But, at last, he had to abandon his vigil of adoration to take his place at the controls. He had decided that his only hope was to land on the sea. Had the ship possessed fuel for the rocket drive, he could have landed anywhere, but she was merely an unpowered glider, and she was coming down fast.

Africa lay astern, and as he swept downward and onward he was seized with a sudden panic lest he miss the sea, so he put *Argonaut* into a steeper dive.

Just before he hit the water, another fear assailed him. This was that he should make his landing many miles from the usual shipping tracks and drift for days, or weeks, in his helpless vessel.

He jerked back on the stick.

Argonaut levelled off at the very instant that she made contact with the surface of the sea. She skittered madly over the long, low swell like a flat stone flung across the surface of a pond by an idle boy. She was uncontrollable.

Clinging to the arms of his seat, Taberner could only hope that she would check

her mad career before she hit something. But she must have, for Taberner suddenly blacked out

WHEN he came round, he was still sitting in the pilot's chair, and water was creeping up around his knees. He had to get out, and fast.

The airlock doors were useless as a possible exit, at least half their diameter must now lie beneath the surface. Taberner looked around wildly, then saw that one of the big ports was badly cracked.

There were tools in one of the lockers amidships. He found them, working by touch, and something that his sensitive finger tips told him was the collapsible dinghy.

He splashed forward with his booty, and fell to attacking the cracked port with all his vigour. The water was up to his waist when it finally yielded. He scrambled through, and had barely time to inflate and launch his boat before *Argonaut* sank.

"Well, gentlemen, that's all. You know the rest of the story."

He turned to Captain Morgan.

"Will you have somebody watch me tonight, sir? The Moon is barely past the full, and there are all those square miles of cursed rock up there, sending out their radiations as the Sun's rays strike them. And their influence might reach me, even here. And the devil alone knows what I might do . . ."

The Old Man cleared his throat. "Of course, my boy. Nothing is too much trouble for . . ." He realized that he was about to break his rule, that which ordained that he was never to praise anybody, either to their faces or behind their backs.

"Mr. Blair!" he barked at the Chief Officer. "Have the Cadets put on watches outside Mr. Taberner's room. Give them a whistle that they can blow to summon help." He turned again to Taberner, looking, for him, almost human. "But you're dog-tired," he said. "You mustn't let us keep you awake. Outside, all of you!"

TABERNER slept well that night, although the Cadets reported that, from time to time, they heard him moaning in his sleep. But he insisted that he

was well enough to come along to the saloon for his breakfast.

When I came down (the practice was for the Fourth Officer to have his before relieving me) I heard Taberner saying, "But I *have* got proof. Didn't I tell you? When I got the tools to smash that port, I found the piece of rock that I had taken from Bruce's pocket. If you have an animal of any kind, I can soon demonstrate its effects!"

"Nobody's doubting your story," said the Old Man, throwing a really nasty glance at Gordon, the Chief Engineer.

"But I insist, Captain!" cried Taberner, rather wildly, I thought.

"For the love of Mike, keep that chunk of rock wrapped up in its lead foil," said Morgan.

Blair chipped in, a rather strange smile on his face. "Why not try it on Stinking Sal?"

Gordon was up in arms at once. "You'll not tamper with *my* cat!" he growled.

"But, Chief, surely letting her sniff a harmless piece of stone won't hurt her? If your opinion of Mr. Taberner's story is correct, no harm can possibly come to your unsanitary pet."

So we all went on deck.

Somebody went in search of Stinking Sal, and Taberner went to his room and came back carrying the jacket he had been wearing when picked up. He fished in the pocket, pulled out what appeared to be an object of irregular shape heavily wrapped in lead foil.

Carefully, staying in the shadow of the deckhouse, he removed the metal covering, revealing a piece of stone. Just a lump of ordinary, crystalline rock. We weren't geologists, and it didn't look anything wonderful for us.

He stepped into a patch of sunlight, put the stone on the deck, stepped hastily back.

It may have been imagination, but it seemed to me that, as the direct rays of the sun struck the innocent seeming piece of rock, it seemed to glow with an evil light of its own.

It *may* have been imagination.

Stinking Sal slunk into the patch of

sunlight, stretched out one tentative paw and gingerly patted the little jagged stone. She seemed to be interested. She withdrew her paw, then took three slow steps forward. She sniffed the stone.

I don't know how the others felt, but I was ready to scream.

But it wasn't me that screamed, it was the cat. She was making a noise that no cat should make, that nothing that lives should ever make. It wasn't fear, and it wasn't rage; it was . . . but there just aren't any words to describe it.

Eyes two pools of blood-lust, she launched herself at Gordon, who was standing by the rail. The Old Man was fast. Before Stinking Sal had covered the distance between her and her master his fist sent the Chief Engineer staggering out of the line of flight.

Stinking Sal rocketed over the side.

"There," said Taberner, "you see."

He stepped forward to pick up his specimen, all that remained of *Argonaut* and her voyage beyond the bounds of sanity.

For a moment, he bounced the stone in his right hand.

Then, quite quietly, in such a matter of fact way that nobody, until it was too late, dreamed of stopping him, he went over the side.

OH, we stopped the ship, of course, and put out an accident boat. But we never found Taberner. Ironically enough Stinking Sal was saved. They found her still afloat, still swimming strongly but aimlessly. But of Taberner, not a trace.

I wonder. Whilst he was at sea, he always had strong views on the subject of Captains going down with their ships . . . But we'll never know.

Anyhow, I've told the story.

It won't be long, now, before the first rockets follow in *Argonaut's* wake, before Man, once more, lands on the Moon. And perhaps some who read this may be warned against the perils that await them at the end of their voyage.

I hope so.

Dwellers In Silence

By RAY BRADBURY



The fire grew in the sky.

A shattered Earth suddenly remembered poor Hathaway, marooned on Mars by the mad rush homeward, all alone. But—was he alone?

WHEN THE WIND CAME through the sky, he and his small family would sit in the stone hut and warm their hands over a small fire. The wind would stir the canal waters and almost blow the stars out of the sky, but Mr. Hathaway would sit contented and talk to his wife and his wife would talk back, and he would talk to his two daughters and his son about the old days on Earth, and they would all reply neatly.

It was the twentieth year after the

Great War. Mars was a tomb planet. Whether or not Earth was the same was a matter for much silent debate for himself, or his family, on the long Martian nights. Then the dust storms came over the low hexagonal tomb buildings, whining past the great ancient gargoyles on the iron mountains, blowing between the last standing pillars of an old city, and tearing away the plastic walls of a newer, American-built city that was melting away into the sand, desolated.

Hathaway rose from the family circle from time to time and went out into the suddenly clear weather following the storm to look up and see Earth burning green there on the windy sky. He put his hand up for a moment, as one might reach up a hand to adjust a dimly burning light globe in the ceiling of a dark room. Then he said something, quietly, and looked across the long dead sea bottom not moving. Not another living thing on this entire planet, he thought just myself. And *then*. He looked back inside the stone hut.

What was happening on Earth now? He stared up until his eyes watered with strain. Had the atom bomb eaten everybody there? He had seen no visible sign of change in the aspect of Earth through his thirty-inch telescope. Well, he thought, he was good for another twenty years if he was careful. Someone might come. Either across the dead seas, or out of space in a rocket, on a little thread of red flame.

He peered into the hut. "I think I'll take a walk," he said.

His wife did not turn.

"I said," he cried, "I think I'll take a walk."

"All right," his wife said.

"That's better," said Hathaway.

He turned and walked quietly down through a series of low ruins. "Made in New York," he read from a piece of metal as he passed. "This will all be gone long before the old Martian ruins." He waved at a city ten thousand years old, intact, that lay on the rim of the dead sea twenty miles over, in a mist. "Did anything like that ever happen on Earth? Well, the Egyptians, almost. They came nearest, because they took their time.

He quieted. He came to the Martian graveyard. It was a series of small hexagonal stones and buildings set in the top of a hill. The drifting sand had never covered them because the hill was too high and swept by the winds.

THERE were four graves with crude wooden crosses on them, and names. He stood for a moment looking down at them. He did nothing with his eyes, they

would do nothing. They had dried up long ago.

"Do you forgive me for what I have done?" he asked of the crosses. "I had to do it. I was so lonely," he said. "You *do* forgive me, don't you? You don't mind. No. No, you don't mind. I'm glad."

He walked back down the hill, looking at the sea bottom. If only something would come; even a monster of some sort would be welcome. Something to run from, perhaps, would be a change.

He reached the stone hut and, once more, just before going inside, he shaded his eyes with his hands, searching the sky.

"You keep waiting and waiting and looking and looking," he said. "And one night, perhaps——"

There was a tiny point of red flame on the sky.

"And you keep looking," he said. "And you look," he said. He stopped. He looked down at the ground. Then he stepped away from the light of the stone hut. "——and you look *again*," he whispered.

The tiny flame point was still there.

"It wasn't there last night," he murmured.

"It is red," he said, finally.

And then his eyes were wet with pain.

"It is a rocket," he said. "My telescope." He stumbled and fell, picked himself up, got around back of the hut and swiveled the telescope so that it pointed into the sky.

A minute later, after a long wild staring, he appeared in the low doorway and he came in to sit by the fireplace. He looked at the fire. The wife and the two daughters and the son looked at him. Finally he said, "I have good news. A ship is coming to take us all home. It will be here in the early morning."

He put his hands down and put his head into his hands and began to cry, gently, with long waiting pain, like a child.

He burned what was left of New York that morning at three.

He took a torch and moved into the plastic and wood city and tapped the walls here or there and the city went up in great tosses of heat and light. When he

walked back out of the city it was a square mile of illumination, big enough to be seen out in space. It would beckon the rocket down to him and his family.

His heart beating rapidly, he returned to the hut where the family waited. "See," he said. He held up an old bottle into the light. "Wine I saved. Just for tonight. I knew that perhaps one day someone would come. And so I saved this. I hid it in the storage shed. We'll have a drink and celebrate!" And he popped the cork out and poured five glasses full. His wife and the three children picked up their glasses, smiling.

"It's been a long time," he said gravely, looking into his drink. "Remember the day the War broke? How long ago? Nineteen years and seven months, exactly. And all the rockets were called home from Mars, and you and I and the children were out in the mountains, doing archaeological work, doing research on the ancient methods of surgery used by the Martians; it helped me a lot in my own work. And we ran our horses, almost killing them, but got back here to the city a week late. Everyone was gone. America had been destroyed; every rocket had left without waiting for stragglers, remember, remember? And, it turned out, we were the only ones left? Lord, Lord, how the years pass. It seems only a day, now. I couldn't have stood it without you here, all of you. I couldn't have stood it at all. I'd have killed myself without you. But, with you, it was worth waiting. Here's to us, then." He raised his drink. "And to our long wait together. And here's to them." He gestured at the sky. "May they land safely and—" A troubled frown.

"—may they be friends to us when they land. He drank his wine.

The wife and the three children raised their glasses to their lips.

The wine ran down over the chins of all four of them.

BY morning the city was blowing in great black soft flakes across the sea bottom. The fire was exhausted, but it had served its purpose; the red spot on the sky enlarged and came down.

From the stone hut came the rich brown smell of baked ginger bread. His wife stood over the table, setting down the hot pans of new bread as Hathaway entered. The two daughters were gently sweeping the bare stone floor with stiff brooms, and the son was polishing the silverware. "We will have a breakfast for them, for everyone in the crew," said Hathaway. "You must all put on your best clothes."

He walked across his land to the vast metal storage shed. Inside, was the cold storage unit and power plant he had repaired and restored with his efficient, small, nervous fingers over the years, just as he had repaired clocks and telephones and spool recorders in his spare time. The shed was full of things he had built, some of them senseless mechanisms the functions of which were a mystery even to himself now as he looked at them. There were jars of liquid and jars of gelatin and other substances.

One day, just for a joke, he had laid telephone wires all the way from the hut to the dead city twenty miles away. He had installed a phone in an empty Martian tower room of the highest cupola in the city and come back, whistling quietly to a freshly fixed dinner of cold storage turnips and filet mignon. Many nights, for the hell of it, he dialed the dead city number, which, with a shine to his eye, he had fixed at 00-000-00.

It would have been interesting if someone had answered.

From the storage deep freeze compartment he now carried frozen cartons of beans and strawberries, twenty years old. Lazarus, come forth, he thought, as he pulled out a cool chicken.

Then the Rocket landed.

Hathaway ran down the hill like a young boy. He had to stop once, because of a sudden sickening pain in his chest. He sat on a rock and breathed out and in. Then he got up and ran all the rest of the way.

"Hello, hello!"

He stood in the hot air of summer that had been caused by the fiery heat of the rocket exhausts. A vent opened in the side of the rocket and a man stood in the round entrance looking down.

"You're an American!" the man shouted.

"So are you; hello!" cried Hathaway, pink-checked.

"Well, I'll be damned!" The man leaped down and walked across the sand swiftly, his hand out. "We expected nothing, and here you are!"

Their hands clasped and held, they looked into each other's faces.

"Why, you're Hathaway, I *know* you." The man was amazed. His grip tightened. His mouth was open and shut and open again, speechless. "Hathaway! When I was a kid, twenty years ago, I saw you in the television set at school. I watched you perform a difficult surgery for a cerebral tumor!"

"Thank you, thank you, I had almost forgotten."

The man from the rocket looked beyond Hathaway. "You're alone? Your wife, I remember her. And there were children——"

"My son, my daughters, my wife, they are at our hut."

"Good, good, splendid. You look *fine*, sir."

"Cold storage and a lot of work. I've kept myself busy. I've had time for my hobbies. I was always interested in machines as they relate to physiology and physiology as it relates to machines, you know. But, your name?"

"Captain Ernest Parsons of Joliet, Illinois, sir."

"Captain Parsons." They were not done with the handshaking yet. "How many in your crew?" "Twenty, sir." "Fine, there's a good breakfast waiting all of you up the hill. "Will you come?" "Will we come?" asked the captain. He turned and looked at the rocket. "Abandon ship!" And it was done in half a minute.

THEY walked up the hill together, Hathaway and the captain, the men following dutifully and talkatively behind, taking in deep breaths of the thin Martian air. The sun rose and it was a good day. It would be warm later. Smoke lifted from the stone hut.

"I'm sorry." Hathaway sat down, his hand on his chest. "All the excitement.

I'll have to wait." He felt his heart moving under his hand. He counted the beats. It was not good.

"We have a doctor with us," said Parsons. "I beg your pardon, sir, I know you *are* one, but we'd best check you with our own, and if you need anything——"

"I'll be all right, the excitement, the waiting." Hathaway could hardly breathe. His face was pale and wet, his lips blue. His hand trembled. "You know," he said, as the doctor came up and put a stethoscope against him, "it's as if I've kept alive just for this day, all those years, and now that you're here and I know Earth is still alive—well, I can lie down and quit."

"You can't do that, sir, there's the breakfast to eat," insisted Parsons, gently. "A fine host that would be."

"Here we are," and the doctor gave Hathaway a small yellow pellet. "I suggest this. You're badly overexcited. It might be a good idea if we carried you the rest of the way."

"Nonsense, just let me sit here a moment. It's good to see you all. It's good to hear your names. What were they again? You introduced me, but when you're excited you don't see or hear or do any thing right. Parsons and Glasgow and Williamson and Hamilton and Spaulding and Ellison and Smith and someone named Brackett and that's all I remember." He smiled weakly, his eyes squinted. "See how good I am?"

"Splendid. Did the pellet work?"

"Well enough. Here we go."

They walked on up the hill.

"Alice, come out and see who we have here," Hathaway called into the hut. The men of the rocket stood waiting and smiling. Hathaway frowned slightly and bent into the doorway once more. "Alice, did you hear, come out now."

His wife appeared in the doorway. A moment later the two daughters, tall and gracious, came out, followed by an even taller son.

"Captain Parsons, my wife. Alice, this is Captain Parsons."

"Mrs. Hathaway, I remember you from a long time ago."

"Captain Parsons." She shook his

hand and turned, still holding his hand. "My daughters, Marguerite and Susan. My son, John. Captain Parsons."

Hathaway stood smiling as hands were shaken all around.

"It's like coming home," said Parsons, simply.

"It's like home having you," said the wife.

Parson sniffed the air. "Is that *gingerbread*?"

"Will you have a piece?"

Everybody laughed. And while folding tables were carried down and set up by the wide canal and hot foods were brought out and set down and plates were placed about with fine silverware and damask napkins, Captain Parsons looked first at Mrs. Hathaway and then at her son and then at her two tall, gracious daughters. He sat upon a folding chair which the son brought him and said, "How old are you, son?"

The son replied, "Twenty-three."

Parsons said nothing else. He looked down at his silverware but his face grew pale and sickly. Hathaway was helping his wife bring out more tureens of food. The man next to Parsons said, "Sir, that can't be right."

"What's that, Williamson? . . . asked Parsons.

"I'm thirty-eight myself, sir. I was in school the same time as young John Hathaway there, twenty years ago. And he says he's only twenty-three. And, by God, he only *looks* twenty-three. But that can't be right. He should be thirty-eight."

"Yes, I know," said Parsons, quietly.

"What does it mean, sir?"

"I don't know."

"You don't look well, sir."

"I'm not feeling very well. Will you do me a favor?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to run a little errand for me. I'll tell you where to go and what to check. Late in the breakfast, slip away. It should take you only five minutes. The place is not far from here."

"Yes, sir."

"Here, what are you two talking so seriously about?" Mrs. Hathaway ladled

quick ladles of soup into their bowls. "Smile now, we're all together, the trip's over, and it's like home!"

"Yes, ma'm," said Captain Parsons. "You look very young, Mrs. Hathaway, I hope you don't mind my saying."

"Isn't that like a man?" And she gave him an extra ladle of soup.

PARSONS watched her move away. Her face was filled with warmth, it was smooth and unwrinkled. She moved around the tables and placed things neatly and laughed at every joke. She stopped never once to sit and take her breath. And the son and daughters were brilliant and witty as their father, telling of the long years and their quiet life.

The breakfast went through its courses. Midway, Williamson slipped quietly off and walked down the hill. "Where is he going so suddenly?" inquired Hathaway. "He'll be right back. There's some stuff he's to check in the rocket," explained Parsons. "But, as I was saying, sir, there wasn't much left of America. The grass country towns, was about all. New York was a wreck. It took twenty years to get things back on an even keel, what with the radio-activity and all. Europe wasn't any better off. But we finally have a World Government."

Parsons talked automatically, reading it off from memory, not listening to himself, thinking only of Williamson going down the hill and coming back to tell what he had found. "Ours is the only rocket now available," said Parsons. "There'll be more in about four years. We're here on a preliminary survey to see what's left of our colonies. Not much here. Perhaps more over at New Chicago. We'll check there this afternoon."

"Thanks," he said, as Marguerite Hathaway filled his water glass. He touched her hand, suddenly. She did not even mind it. Her hand was warm. "Incredible," thought Parsons.

Hathaway, at the head of the table, paused long enough to press his hand to his chest. Then he went on, listening to the talk, looking now and then, with concern, at Parsons, who did not seem to be enjoying his meal.

Williamson returned up the hill, in a great hurry.

Williamson sat down beside Parsons. He was agitated and his cheeks were white. He could not keep his mind on his food, he kept picking at it until the captain whispered aside to him, "Well?"

"I found it, sir, what you sent me to find, sir."

"And?"

"I went down the hill and up that other hill until I came to the graveyard, as you directed." Williamson kept his eyes on the party. People were laughing. The daughters were smiling gravely and blinking and the son was telling a joke. Hathaway was smoking a cigarette, his first really fresh one in years. "And," said Williamson, "I went into the graveyard."

"The four crosses were there?" asked Parsons.

"The four crosses were there, sir. The names were still on them. I wrote them down to be sure." He produced a white paper and read from it. "Alice Hathaway, Marguerite, Susan and John Hathaway. All four died of the plague in July, 1997."

"Thank you, Williamson," said Parsons. He closed his eyes.

"Twenty years ago, sir," said Williamson, his hands trembling. He was afraid to look up at the people at the table.

"Yes, twenty years ago," said Parsons.

"Then, who are *these*?" And Williamson wide-eyed, nodded at the two daughters and the son and the wife of Hathaway, the last man on Mars.

"I don't know, Williamson."

"What are you going to do, sir?"

"I don't know that either," he said, slowly.

"Will we tell the other men?"

"No, not yet. Later. Go on with your food as if nothing had happened."

"I'm not very hungry now, sir."

They both began on their dessert.

THE meal ended with wine brought from the rocket. Hathaway rose to his feet, holding his glass. "A toast to all of you, it is good to be with friends again." He moved his wine glass ever so little in the air. "And to my wife, and my children, without whom I could not

have survived alone. It is only through their kindness in caring for me, that I have lived on, waiting for your arrival. Else, years ago, I would have put a bullet in my head." He moved his glass now to his wife, now to his children, who looked back self-consciously, lowering their eyes at last as everyone drank.

Parsons' eyelids were flickering nervously. His hands were moving uneasily on his lap.

Hathaway drank down his wine and fell forward onto the table and then slipped toward the ground. He did not cry out. Several of the men caught and eased him to the ground where the doctor felt of his chest, listened, and remained there, listening, until Parsons arrived with Williamson.

The doctor looked up and shook his head. Parsons knelt and took the old man's hand. "Parsons, is that you?" Hathaway's voice was barely audible. Parsons nodded. "I'm sorry," said Hathaway, gently grieved. "I had to spoil the breakfast." "Never you mind," said Parsons. "Say goodbye to Alice and the children for me," said the old man. "They're right here," said Parsons. "Just a moment, I'll call them." "No, no, don't; they wouldn't understand, I wouldn't want them to understand, no, don't," whispered Hathaway. Parsons did not move.

A moment later old Dr. Hathaway was dead.

Parsons waited for a long time. Then he arose and walked away from the small stunned group around Hathaway. He went to Alice Hathaway and looked into her face and said, "Do you know what has just happened?"

"It's something about my husband," she said.

"He's just passed away; his heart," said Parsons, watching her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"He didn't want us to feel badly, he told us it would happen one day, and he didn't want us to cry. He didn't teach us how, you know. He didn't want us to know, he said it was the worst thing that could happen to a man to know how to be lonely and to know how to be sad and then cry.

So we're not to know what death is or what crying is or being sad."

Parsons looked off at the mountains. "Perhaps it's just as well." He glanced at her hands, the soft warm hands and the fine manicured nails and the tapered wrists. And he looked at the slender smooth white neck and the intelligent eyes. "I know all about you," he said, finally.

"But the others don't." She was confident of that.

"No, you're so perfect they haven't guessed. Mr. Hathaway did a fine job on you and your children."

"He would have liked to hear you say that. He was so very proud of us. After a while he even forgot that he had made us. At the end he loved and took us as his real wife and children. And, in a way, we are."

"You gave him a great deal of comfort," said Parsons.

"Yes, over the years we sat and talked and talked. He so much loved to talk. He liked the stone hut and the open fire. We could have lived in a regular house in the town, but he liked it up here, where he could be primitive if he liked, or modern if he liked. He told me all about his laboratory and the things he did in it. Once he wired the entire dead American town below with sound speakers and when he pressed a button the town lit up and made noises as if ten thousand people lived in it. There were airplane noises and car noises and the sounds of people talking. He would sit and light a cigar and talk to us and the sounds would come up from the town and once in awhile the phone would ring and a recorded voice, Mr. Hathaway himself, would ask Mr. Hathaway scientific and surgical questions and he would answer them, and then I'd make strawberry biscuits. Mr. Hathaway took a transcription of his voice down into town each day, put it in a automatic telephone that called us every night. And with the phone ringing and us here and the sounds of the town and the cigar, I'm sure Mr. Hathaway was quite happy."

"Twenty years, the five of you living here," said Parsons.

"There's only one thing he couldn't make us do," she said. "And that was grow old. He got older every day but we stayed the same. I guess he didn't mind. I guess he wanted us that way."

"We'll bury him down in the yard where the other four crosses are. I think he would like that."

She put her hand on his wrist, lightly. "I'm sure he would."

ORDERS were given. The wife and the three children followed the little procession down the hill. Two men carried Hathaway on a covered stretcher. They passed the stone hut and the storage shed where Hathaway twenty years ago had begun his work. Parsons stepped from the procession a moment to stand within the doorway of the workshop.

How would it be to be alone on a planet with a wife and three children and then to have them die of the plague, leaving you alone in a world with nothing on it but wind and silence? What would you do? You would bury them with crosses in the graveyard and then come back up to your workshop and with all the power of mind and memory and accuracy of finger and genius, put together, bit by bit, all those things that were wife, son and daughter. With an entire American city below from which to draw needed supplies, a brilliant man might do anything.

Parsons returned to the procession. The sound of their footsteps was muffled in the sand. At the graveyard, as they turned in, two men were already spading out the earth.

The men came back to the rocket in the late afternoon. They stood in a circle around the captain.

Williamson nodded up at the stone hut. "What are you going to do about *them*?"

"I don't know," said the captain.

"Are you going to turn them off?"

"Off? The captain looked faintly surprised. "It never entered my mind."

"You're not going to take them back with us?"

"No, we haven't space for them."

"You mean you're going to leave them here, like that, like they are? It's sort of ghastly, the thought of them being here."

The captain gave Smith a gun. "If you can do something about this, you're a better man than I."

Five minutes later, Williamson returned from the hut, sweating. He handed the gun back. "Here. Take it. I know what you mean, now. I went in with the gun. One of the daughters looked up at me. She smiled. So did the others. The wife said something about sitting down for a cup of tea. That did it. God, God, it would be murder." He shook his head.

Parsons nodded. "After all the work he put in on them, it would be killing. There'll never be anything as fine as them again, ever. They're built to last; ten, fifty, two hundred years. Yes, they've as much right to live as you or I or any of us." He knocked out his pipe. "Well, get aboard. We're taking off. This city's done for, we'll not be using it."

It was getting late in the day. The wind was rising. All the men were aboard. The captain hesitated. Williamson looked at him and said, "Don't tell me you're going back to say—good-bye—to them?"

The captain looked at Williamson coldly. "None of your damn business."

Parsons walked up toward the hut through the darkening wind. The men in

the rocket saw his shadow lingering inside the stone hut door. They saw a woman's shadow. They saw the captain put out his hand to shake her hand.

A minute later, he came running back to the rocket.

The rocket went up into the sky. It was only a red point, going away.

AND NOW, on nights when the wind comes over the dead sea bottoms and through the hexagonal graveyard where there are four old crosses and one new fresh one, there is a light burning in the low stone hut on the edge of the burned New New York, and in that hut, as the wind roars by and the dust sifts down and the cold stars burn, are four figures, a woman, two daughters and a son, tending a low fire for no reason and talking and laughing, and this goes on night after night for every year and every year, and some nights, for no reason, the wife comes out and looks at the sky, her hands up, for a long moment, looking at the green burning of Earth, not knowing why she looks, knowing nothing, and then she goes back in and throws a stick on the fire and the wind comes up and the dead sea goes on being dead.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 of PLANET STORIES, published quarterly at New York, N. Y., for Oct. 1, 1948.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.:

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Paul L. Payne, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of the PLANET STORIES and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Love Romances Publishing Company, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; Editor, Paul L. Payne, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; Managing editor, none; Business manager, T. T. Scott, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.; J. G. Scott, 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

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5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily, weekly, semi-weekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

(Signed) PAUL L. PAYNE,
Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 21st day of September, 1948.

LIONEL G. MOORE,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires March 30, 1950.)



Oscar's tentacles writhed delicately.

THE STAR BEAST

By DAMON KNIGHT

They called this strange tentacle-headed blob that had floundered into the System Oscar. They were to learn a better name.

THE OBSERVATION DECK OF the *President Marcus*, this early in the ship's arbitrary morning, was deserted except for two shapeless figures. One of them was dead.

The body was sprawled in the curve of the deck about midway between two of the entrance wells. It had arms and legs, if you looked closely enough at the limp tangle of garments; it had a gray beard and a purple face.

The other figure had neither limbs nor a face. It was black, and it looked more like a pile of mud than anything else: a five-foot lump of black mud, slightly flattened at either side, with a cluster of black, stumpy filaments at the top. It moved slightly, dropping the filaments a little toward the dead body; then it flowed away again, and the filaments pointed straight up, toward the stars.

Phil Horitz came up at the forward

end of the deck. He let the levitor push him gently clear of the well then stepped over to the glassine and looked out at the tiny blue disk that was Earth. His back was to the body and its watcher. He struck a cigarette, inhaling deeply, then turned around.

He swore and threw his cigarette away, leaping forward at the same instant. He skidded to a halt in front of the corpse and fell to one knee beside it. "Dead," he said. "Oh, Lord."

He searched the body swiftly, and came up with a flat metal box, attached by a silver chain to the body's middle. He tried the lid; it opened easily. The box was empty.

Horitz sighed and lifted the dead man's chin. Under the grey beard was a deeply-indented red line that encircled the throat.

He stood up and pressed a button on his wrist transceiver. "Walsh," he said. "Sommers. Get up to the observation deck. *Thomasson has been murdered.*"

A deep voice swore fervently in his ear. He didn't wait for it to finish. He made an adjustment on the transceiver and said, "Captain Tooker, please. This is Philip Horitz." A querulous male voice spoke: "Yes, Horitz? What do you want?"

Horitz repeated his message, and added, "I'm bringing the body down to Thomasson's stateroom. Get the ship's doctor and meet me there."

Two figures exploded out of the levitor well a dozen yards away; one bulky and grey-haired, the other lean and young. They ran up to Horitz, panting. The bulky one, Walsh, was still swearing.

"I watched him like a baby," he protested. "He told me he was going to get up at nine this morning, so I set my watch for eight. *Why* the howling hell did he—"

"Save it," said Horitz. "He did. I'll take his head, Sommers, you take his feet. Walsh, think you can carry Oscar?"

"Listen, Phil," said Sommers abruptly, "are the Equations gone?"

"Yes," Horitz told him. "They're gone."

Walsh grunted and, stooping, wrapped his arms around the black thing. He lifted it without apparent effort. The

stumpy tendrils waved down toward him, then stood upright again, ignoring him. The other two picked up the body of Thomasson, and all three walked back to the levitor well from which they had come.

Captain Tooker and the medical officer, Dr. Evans, met them at the door of the dead man's stateroom. Tooker was boiling over. "Do you call yourselves Security agents?" he shouted. "Three of you, to protect one man, and you couldn't do it. I'll raise hell about this, Horitz, see if I don't."

Horitz and Sommers put the body down on the bed, and Dr. Evans fell quietly to examining it. "We'll find the killer," said Horitz grimly, "or else any hell you can raise will be a sneeze in a gale of wind. You don't know the half of this yet."

"I know that a man has been murdered on my ship," said Tooker.

"A man!" said Sommers, staring at him. "A whole planet may have been murdered, unless we get the Equations back."

"What equations?" said Tooker. "What the devil are you talking about?"

"The Thomasson Equations," said Sommers, "are the answer to the problem of faster-than-light space travel. Prof. Thomasson derived them from observations he made on the space shell this thing—" he gestured at Oscar—"landed on Pluto in, last year."

Captain Tooker glanced at Oscar with evident dislike. "Well," he said, "what are you going to do about it?"

"Have the ship searched," said Horitz quietly; "but that won't do any good. There are a hundred ways the killer could hide the Equations so that no search would ever find them. Our one chance, I'm afraid, is to get the only witness to tell us who garroted Thomasson."

"The witness?" said the captain, staring. "Who?"

Horitz turned to look at the black, five-foot lump, with its gently waving tendrils. "Oscar," he said.

OSCAR had come whirling out of interstellar space almost a year ago, in a thin, cloudy shell hardly bigger than himself. The shell was partly wrecked

and put out of control; but by sheer luck, a supply ship had picked it up and hauled it in to Pluto. The newspapers had labeled its occupant a Centaurian, since he came from that general sector of space; but actually, no one knew. The scientists at the Pluto Station who had sweated over him for a year had found out exasperatingly little. He had no eyes or ears, and yet he was aware of things around him. He had no recognizable brain; he had no skeleton, no lungs, no circulatory system and no excretory system. He got his energy, they thought, from cosmic radiation; but they didn't know for sure.

His tendrils or filaments—the stumpy, fingerlike organs on top of his shapeless body—had no function that they would discover. They did not respond to sound, to light, to heat or any other known radiation—but they followed moving objects, in a dark room as well as in a light one.

He was somehow able to emit and receive radio waves. They were able to communicate with him, after a fashion, that way. They suspected it wasn't his normal method of communication; but when they ticked at him with a Morse sender, he obligingly ticked back. Slowly and painfully, during that year, they had worked up from $1+1=2$, to $9^8=729$, to simple nouns and a few verbs, in a code they invented as they went along. They could talk to Oscar, and Oscar could talk to them. The only trouble was, that nothing Oscar said made much sense—to men.

"That's the whole difficulty," explained Dr. Y. Ilyanov, running her fingers through her thick yellow hair. Dr. Ilyanov was one of the two assistants Thomasson had brought along, and very beautiful. The other was Dr. Hugh Meers, who was bald and not beautiful at all.

"You understand, he perceives—but he doesn't perceive with human senses or think in human patterns. Undoubtedly, he saw Professor Thomasson killed; but he saw it—differently."

"If we could only get some scrap of description," said Walsh. "Surely he can tell size, for instance? If we knew whether the murderer was a big man or a little man, even that would help."

"You're thinking, I'll venture, of a par-

ticularly big man," said Dr. Meers. "Carson Jahore, the ambassador from the Jovian Federation."

Horitz nodded. "A prime suspect. The Federation has always been too big for its planets. They'd give anything for a space-drive that would let them beat Earth to the punch in interstellar colonization."

"Well," said Walsh, "what about my question? Can't Oscar tell the difference between a big man and a little one?"

Dr. Meers' brow wrinkled. "Not in the way a man could," he said. "If you put them side by side, then perhaps yes. Perhaps, mind you. But—don't you see, he hasn't got one of our senses, except touch. Instead, he probably has a whole gamut of his own. Lord only knows how he differentiates between one man and another, or between one apple and another. He doesn't do it our way, anyhow."

"Look here," said Captain Tooker impatiently, "we're wasting time. Why can't we just search everybody on board?"

"Have you got authority," asked Horitz carefully, "to strip Ambassador Jahore and his wife to the skin and put them and all their belongings through five hundred and twenty different chemical solutions? For a starter, that is? If you have, go ahead. I haven't."

The captain shuddered.

"Just the same," said Horitz, standing up, "you're right; we are wasting time. Have you got that passenger list, Captain?"

"Yes; here," Tooker said, producing it. "I've got to get back. If anything happens, buzz me. And it had better be soon!" he added as he left.

"All right." Horitz turned to the two scientists. "Dr. Meers, can you and Dr. Ilyanov make Oscar understand this much: that he's to signal when he sees the man who was with Thomasson on the observation deck this morning?"

Meers shrugged. "We can try," he said. "I don't promise anything." He pulled his chair over to the crude Morse set on the table and began clicking the key.

OSCAR'S tendrils waved slowly back and forth, as if he were interested in anything in the world but radio clicks.

Meers stopped, waited a moment, then tried again.

Tick-tick, said the amplifier.

Meers nodded. "He says yes. Whether he really knows what we want, or not, I can't say."

Horitz spoke into his transceiver: "Central. Will you please page Mr. Abbot, Miss Acheson, Mr. and Mrs. Adler and Mr. Aguirre? Ask them to come to stateroom B39."

One by one, the passengers whose names began with A were let into the stateroom and presented to Oscar. Oscar said nothing. The passengers, bewildered or indignant, were ushered out and a new batch came in.

They went through the B's, the C's, the D's, the E's, the F's, the G's, the H's, the I's . . . The whole list numbered about 150, some of whom had been shuttled aboard at the Jovian System, others at Mars. Finally Horitz called a halt for lunch. Dr. Meers, pleading indisposition, had gone to lie down in his stateroom. The three Security men were alone with Dr. Ilyanov—and Oscar.

Walsh, munching a corned-beef sandwich, started at the black lump balefully. "Honestly, Dr. Ilyanov," he said, "doesn't he ever give you the creeps?"

She smiled slightly. "Honestly—yes. I dream about him sometimes."

Sommers glanced at her curiously. "What do you dream?" he asked.

"Well—" she hesitated. "It's really silly, but—Last night, you see, I was thinking of something poor Professor Thomasson had said, half-jokingly, when we were discussing Oscar. He said that Oscar might not be a complete organism." She gestured toward the black thing on the table. "You know—his flat underside, that he walks with, and those curious flat areas along his sides? He can grip with those. If you put your hand there, he grips it."

Horitz nodded. "Thomasson showed me that trick." He reached over and put his hand on Oscar's black, glutinous side. "Shake hands, Oscar."

The hand sank visibly in the black flesh. When Horitz pulled it away, there was a small sucking noise.

"Ugh," said Walsh disgustedly.

"Well," continued Dr. Ilyanov, "you know that Oscar's space shell was wrecked. Professor Thomasson suggested that the accident that wrecked it might have wrecked Oscar too—that really, when he is all there, he is three or four Oscars linked together—"

She laughed embarrassedly. "Anyhow, when I slept last night, I had this nightmare. I dreamed that I saw Oscar floating in space, but there was more of him. There was another similar shape attached behind him, and two smaller ones, one on either side. He was like a sort of black cross—with those horrible tassels waving at each point of it—floating along, under the stars . . ."

"Well," said Horitz puzzledly, "what was so horrible about that?"

"Why, I don't know," said Dr. Ilyanov. "But it was."

Horitz crumpled up his sandwich-wrappers and threw them into the waste chute. "Might as well get started again," he said. He picked up the passenger list and read, "Jaeger, Jahore, Jessamin, Johnson."

OSCAR watched interestedly as the beings in the room moved about, trailing their flaming auras. These people had strange and sometimes frightening counterpoints, he thought, but they were undeniably picturesque. He would have a story to tell when he got home.

One of the creatures arose and moved across the room. Its glowing sheath was bright reeve, with radiating streaks of darker gel. Inside, the shadowy nucleus seemed to be constructed differently from the others. Oscar followed it with the waving seelers atop his own nucleus. If he could only get into syntact with that one, he thought, he might find out something about it. Perhaps it had been badly mormoned when it was young; or perhaps it was a different species entirely. It was hard to see, with these people.

Two more beings came into the room, one of them tall but with a slight nucleus, shaped like the one he had just been examining. He felt it with interest, but it was as uncommunicative as the other. The

figure beside it was of an uninspiring shape, but its aura was reminiscent. He recalled that something was expected of him.

Carson Jahore was a big man, with the dark skin and fair hair that characterized his race. He was saying loudly, "—I won't stand for it, d'you hear? D'you think you can drag me and my wife in here like any common suspect? I'll hear an apology, or by God, heads will roll!"

Tick-tick-tick, said the amplifier on the table.

"There's your apology," said Horitz, his eyes shining. "Where have you hidden the Equations, Ambassador Jahore?"

"What is this?" roared the ambassador. "What equations? What's that thing? Are you all mad?"

Dr. Ilyanov put a hand on Horitz's arm. "Please," she said, "don't be hasty. We don't know that Oscar understands, remember. Let's at least run through the rest of the passenger list, and see if he picks out anyone else."

"I never heard such nonsense in my life," put in Mrs. Jahore, who was small and sultry. "Come along, Carson, let's go and tell the captain."

"I've already buzzed the captain," said Horitz. He glanced at Dr. Ilyanov. "You're right, of course. Walsh, take Ambassador and Mrs. Jahore into the other room. If they make any trouble, give them a jolt."

Walsh, with his electrogun out, herded the pair into the next room. Jahore's shouts continued for some time.

"Ask Oscar if he was *sure*," suggested Sommers.

Dr. Ilyanov stepped to the Morse sender and tapped out the message.

Tick-tick, said Oscar.

"Well, that's good enough for me," said Sommers, "but we might as well have the rest in, I suppose.

The captain called Horitz via his wrist phone, swore fearfully when he heard that they had bagged the ambassador, and promised to come down later. Horitz continued to read off lists of names to the central operator, bringing in groups of passengers whose nervousness increased as rumors spread through the ship.

HORITZ strode up and down the room, slamming one fist into the palm of the other hand. "There must be something we've overlooked," he said. "We've got to figure out what the semantic block is between us and Oscar. I know it's something simple, I feel it; but——"

Dr. Ilyanov was frowning thoughtfully. "I have an idea," she said. "Did it ever occur to you that Dr. Tooker might be the man we are looking for?"

"Tooker!" said Horitz.

"Yes. You saw how jealous he is of his job on this ship. If the Thomasson Equations were used, he would certainly be put out of work. To a man like that, it would be worse than death. And remember, he has not been in this room since we asked Oscar to point out the killer."

"You might be right," said Horitz slowly. "But even if Oscar put the finger on him, it wouldn't prove anything unless we can find out what Oscar means.

"Please try it," said the girl. "I have—I have a theory."

"Yes," said Horitz.

She flushed slowly. "I know it sounds absurd," she said, "but I think Oscar has been pointing out all the ones on this ship who *could* have killed Professor Thomasson—who had reasons to. I think he perceives that, just as we'd perceive a man's height, or his manner of walking."

Horitz looked at her doubtfully.

"Don't you see," she went on, "that would explain why he pointed out two when we asked for only one? They look the same to him—he can't tell them apart!"

"Maybe you've got it," said Horitz. He opened the transceiver and said, "Captain Tooker, please. Horitz calling.

"Yes, Horitz?" said the captain's voice.

"Can you come down immediately? I think we've got this thing licked."

The captain walked in a few minutes later. "Horitz" he said, you deserve a medal. "Who is it?"

Tick-tick-tick, said the amplifier.

"Maybe you," Horitz told him. He produced his electrogun and waved the

captain over toward the wall. "No offense, but I've got to make sure."

"What!" shouted the captain, his face reddening. "Are you crazy, Horitz? Put that gun down!"

"Shut up," said Horitz, "please." He moved over to the connecting door, opened it and said, "Bring them out."

Walsh and Sommers herded their prisoners back into the room. The Jahores had subsided some time before, but broke out afresh when they saw that they were not going to be released. The captain tried to shout the Jahores, and it took Horitz a full minute to quiet them.

When they were silent at last, he said. "Oscar has pointed out each of you as the one who murdered Professor Thomasson. Now's the time to confess."

No one said anything. Horitz picked up the passenger list from the table and glanced at it. "All right," he said. He adjusted his transceiver and said, "Stewards' Department? This is Horitz, in stateroom B39. I want the stewards who serve A deck, Section 3, C deck. Section 5, and the Captain's quarters. Get them down here fast."

THE stewards arrived, looking apprehensive. There were five of them in all: two for each of the passenger sections, and one for Tooker. The latter said to Horitz, "Is there anything wrong, sir?"

"Nothing that need worry you," Horitz told them. "Just stand there and answer any questions I may ask you." He turned to Jahore. "Professor Thomasson was killed at a very early hour this morning," he said. "According to the ship's doctor, he had been dead approximately thirty minutes when I found him, and that was at seven-thirty. What time did you leave your stateroom this morning, Ambassador?"

"I don't know that that concerns you, you insolent puppy!" Jahore replied.

"Answer him, dearest" said his wife. "Let's get this beastly business over."

"Oh, very well," said the ambassador. "I was up at nine."

"Is that correct?" Horitz said to the stewards.

One of them spoke up, "Yes, sir, I believe so. I was in the corridor when His Excellency came out, and it was at about nine o'clock, sir."

Horitz bowed slightly. "You have my apologies, Ambassador. You and your wife may go now."

"Just a minute," said Sommers unexpectedly. "Oscar clicked when both the Ambassador and his wife were in the room, didn't he? Mrs. Jahore, when did you leave the stateroom?"

"At ten-thirty," the woman said coldly.

"That's correct, sir," said the steward. "I was working in that section almost all the morning, and I saw Mrs. Jahore leave at that time."

"Please accept my apologies also," said Tooker to the Jahores, trying to curb his apoplexy. "I assure you, sir, that this was none of my doing."

"You're not out of the woods yet yourself, Captain," said Horitz wryly.

Mrs. Jahore tugged at her husband's sleeve, but the ambassador looked interested. "You're in this too, are you?" he said to Tooker. "I think I'll stay and see the finish."

Horitz looked at Tooker. "Well, Captain?"

"I was up at six-thirty," said the captain.

"Right?" said Horitz.

The steward coughed. "Approximately right, sir. I should say that it was more nearly six-forty."

"Where did you go, Captain Tooker?" asked Horitz. "To the control room?"

"Certainly."

"Who was on duty there?"

"First mate—Marshall," said the captain angrily.

Horitz lifted his transceiver.

"All right!" said the captain, raising his hand. "I didn't arrive in the control room until seven-thirty. I can't account for the time, either, or rather I won't. I suppose you think you can burn me for that."

"Maybe," said Horitz soberly. "For your own sake, I advise you to tell me where you were."

The captain wilted suddenly. "I was—visiting a certain lady," he said. "That's all I'll tell you, but it's the truth." He

stiffened again, and glared at Horitz. "If it comes to that, what time did you get up this morning?"

"Seven-twenty," said Horitz. "Well it's one of you two," he began.

One of the stewards coughed. "Excuse me, sir," he said, "but what you said isn't true.

Horitz looked at him without comprehension. "What isn't true?" he asked.

"You didn't get up at seven-twenty, sir. I saw you leave at not later than six-forty-five, sir."

Horitz simply stared at him. "What are you lying for?" he asked, puzzled.

"I'm not lying," the man said stiffly. "I remember distinctly, because I thought it was odd at the time. You left your room at a quarter to seven, and then I saw you come back about twenty minutes later. Both times, you had a funny sort of expression on your face—sort of dazed, you looked. When you came back, you had some papers in one hand, and you were carrying your belt in the other, sir."

The others were all staring at Horitz.

"His belt!" said Sommers. His gun swiveled to point at Horitz. "I'm sorry, Phil. Drop your gun."

Horitz dropped it, and Walsh scooped it up.

"Then he went into his stateroom and locked the door," said the steward excitedly, "and about twenty after seven he came out again, looking for all the world as if he'd just waked up. I went into the room, being a little curious, and looked around to see if I could see the papers, or anything. I didn't see the papers, but there was scraps of burnt paper and ashes all around the waste chute. It looked to me as if he burnt them up."

HORITZ felt numb. The words he was hearing, incredibly, awoke echoes of memory . . . a memory that had not been there an instant before.

"Burned them!" said the girl, her eyes wide. "But why!"

Sommers was speaking rapidly into his wrist transceiver, and a few moments later the ship's doctor bustled in, carrying his bag.

"Give your belt to Dr. Evans, Phil," said Sommers.

This is crazy, thought Horitz to himself. I'm dreaming. He took off the thin rawhide band he wore about his waist and handed it over to the doctor. *I remember his face, he thought. His purple face as I . . . But I didn't. I couldn't have!*

The doctor took the belt, casting a sharp glance at Horitz, and held it up to the light in his gloved hands. He took a bulky instrument from his bag, clipped a section of the belt into its base and peered at it through the eyepieces. He looked up after a moment and nodded.

"Traces of human skin," he said. "This is undoubtedly the instrument which was used to kill Professor Thomasson."

"I think I understand now," said Dr. Ilyanov slowly, staring straight ahead of her. "We forgot one person who had a motive . . . Oscar! He didn't want us to reach the stars . . ."

She turned until her wide gaze rested on Horitz's face. "And you shook hands with him!" she said.

The nightmare boiled up in Horitz's head. Impossible things, memories from nowhere, battled with his sanity: the silent decks, the slow, dreamlike progress upward into starlight . . . and the hideous purple face, staring impersonally into his.

Raging, his mind retreated, flung itself away from the thing that was hurting it. He felt his body in motion, felt himself caught, struggling, but it was as if he were a far-off spectator. The words that came to him were meaningless.

Walsh and Sommers, holding him, looked at each other across the prostrate body. The muscles on Walsh's heavy forearms stood out, and there was sweat on Sommers' forehead. Gradually the struggles subsided: Horitz lay still and white, looking upward at nothing.

Dr. Ilyanov came to kneel over him. She said, "He will be cured. And he can't be punished, of course." She turned her head slowly toward the black shape across the room. "But—" she said—"neither can that thing!"

Oscar's tentacles writhed, delicately.

LADY INTO HELL-CAT

By STANLEY MULLEN

Tracking her across black space-lanes and slapping magnetic bracelets on her was duck soup for S. P. Agent Heydrick. Only then did he learn what a planet-load of trouble he'd bought.

THE INSPECTOR OF SECURITY police dropped his shoes on the floor and put his feet on the desk where he could watch his toes wriggle.

"Sure we're sloppy here," he said beligerently. "You pretty boys of the Space Patrol don't know what it's like in a slime-hole frontier town like 9 Ganymede."

Lee Heydrick smiled grimly. "I guess you didn't catch my name. I earned these service bars of mine. I was one of four survivors of the first Trans-Plutonian Expedition."

The inspector suddenly became respectful. "Oh, you're that Heydrick?" He referred to the credentials on his desk. "What's a pirate-chaser like you doing on an assignment like this? Seems like picking up fugitive murderers for the disintegrators is a job for the security police."

Heydrick grunted. "So it is. I don't like the job any better than you do. But this is no ordinary murderer. She's a red Martian. Killed Feyjak, third man in the Red Council. Worked in his laboratory. They suspect a Wilding plot."

"Feyjak, eh? They ought to give her a medal. I feel sorry for the girl—good-looker, too. Still sounds like a police job."

Heydrick growled. "Yes, it does. Just some more rotten politics. There's not supposed to be any politics in the Space Patrol. Hooley! The Red Scientists are in power, and my foster father, Tyko, is head man of the Blue. So I get assignments like this. Just so they can get a whack at Tyko. They hope I'll fail—that's all they want."

The inspector warmed noticeably. "So Tyko's your foster? I'm a blue myself . . . out of working hours. That's why I'm stuck in a last frontier hellhole like this. Anything I can do to help?"

Heydrick loosened up and sat down. "I don't know. It's a mean job any way

you look at it. The girl says she didn't kill him. They can't use scopolamine. She's a desert dweller of the old blood, and it doesn't work on 'em. Why would she kill Feyjak? He wasn't a bad sort. A bit dim, but that's all. Of course, if she's a Wilding, that would explain after a fashion. They're all fanatics, but why Feyjak? They could knock off a lot of others more important. We got a tip she's hiding out on Ganymede. A place called the Spacerat's Roost. Know anything about it?"

The inspector whistled. "Not much. Enough to stay clear of the place. It's a dive in the Interplanetary Quarter, a damn tough hole. Mostly Plutonium prospectors and fungi hunters hang out there. We suspect it's mixed up in the illegal Moondrug traffic, but can't prove anything. I never send my boys into that quarter unless it's necessary, and then only in squads of four. Sure you don't want help?"

Heydrick grinned sourly. "I wouldn't want your boys to get their pretty uniforms dirty. Do you think you could make me look like a Plutonium prospector?"

"Can do—that all?"

"Draw me a map of the district. I'll need to know my way around."

"I'd rather draw it than show you. I wouldn't go there alone. Not at night. They don't like cops."

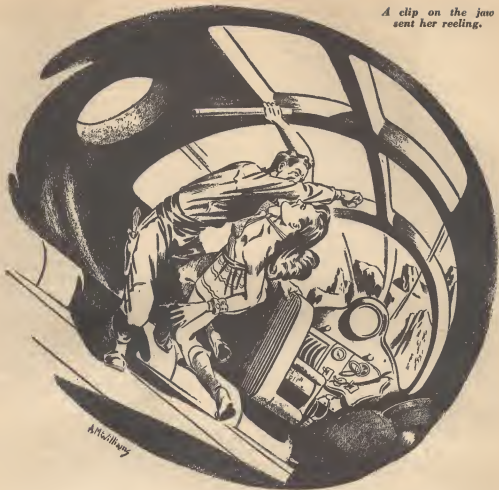
"Neither do I," Heydrick showed his teeth like an amiable wolf.

"If you're not back in two days, we'll come in after you."

"I'll be back."

THE air in the Spacerat's Roost was thick with Fung-weed smoke. Heydrick mingled with the crowd inside the doorway and noticed men from every inhabited world in the Solar System. He

*A clip on the jaw
sent her reeling.*



spotted a vacant table and elbowed his way to it. A drug-soaked horror from Venus, obviously the bouncer, looked dubiously at the newcomer in his scuffed prospector's leather. Heydrick pounded on the table for service.

The waiter was a Jovian octopus man with five tentacles and three eyes. He came and hovered over the table, blinking sadly, as if life was a burden to him.

"What'll you have?"

"What've you got?"

The waiter waved a tentacle airily. "Anything you can name — Snow-grape Champagne from Mars, Deimos rice-nectar, Toad's-eye brandy and Banana-beer from Venus . . ." he paused dramatically, leaned close and whispered, "even a bit of Blue Moonfoam from Callisto for special customers."

Heydrick winked. "I'm a special customer."

"You must have more money than sense," the waiter observed. "It'll be twenty vikdals, Martian."

Heydrick flicked a hundred vikdal platinum coin on the table. The octopus man uncoiled a tentacle and snatched it up, tested it for weight, then shambled off. He returned with a dusty bottle and the change. Heydrick let the change lie.

"Would you like to earn the rest of it?"

The octopus creature clucked somewhere within the unholy cavern which served him as mouth. "I'd kill anyone on Ganymede for half of that," he observed. "What'ya want me to do?"

Heydrick drew a deep breath. "You've a singer here who calls herself the *Red*

Leopard of Mars. When does she go on?"

The waiter consulted a wrist-chron. "Anytime now. She's temperamental."

"When she's finished her turn, ask her to come to my table." The Jovian shrugged and moved off.

The houselights dimmed suddenly. A shower of colored lights played upon the raised stage. Soft nostalgic music poured from an unseen source. Soundlessly, a series of colored crystal screens slid back. At the back of the stage was a shadowy figure half-concealed by clouds of gossamer stuff blown wildly by concealed fans. Slowly, with infinite insolence, the figure moved to the point of the triangular stage. She stood motionless, waiting, while the babel of unearthly tongues died away in silence. The music grew louder. Veil by veil she flung off the filmy draperies until she stood revealed. Klatthgar . . .

She wore the conventional garb of a woman of the ancient desert dwellers, jewelled copper breast-plates, a circlet of beaten bronze binding her wealth of red-violet hair, her eyes glittering like emerald fire; and the long divided skirt concealed little of her shapely body. Leashed, beside her, was the restless, slithering shadow of a red sand-leopard.

Against the wavering, eerie melody, and a patterned off-beat throb of tomtoms, she began to sing. Her voice was rich, throaty, and the song a poignant love-song of the ancient desert people. For a moment Heydrick forgot where he was and who *she* was. The hopeless yearning and infinite tragedy of the music played unpleasantly with his soul-memories. The weird denizens of the Spacerat's Roost sat enthralled.

The song ended upon a note of earth-sick despair, a haunting melancholy for things that will never again be as they were, never, if the planets swing round a dead sun in an empty sky.

The singer bowed, half-contemptuously, to the storm of applause, then retired.

Heydrick drew the identification space-photo from his pocket and studied it. There was no doubt. Despite the heavy make-up, the features were the same. Ria Tarsen and Klatthgar were the same.

In moments the girl was back. She had shed her glamor-costume and was nearly naked in the briefest of skirts, legs shimmering in painted stockings, high-breasts caught in a tight sheen of semi-translucent material. This time she sang a bawdy song, "If Asteroids were Asterisks," about a girl who went for a rocket-ride with an octopus man, and had to hitch-hike home from the Moons of Jupiter.

The crowd went wild. The number finished with a rowdy burlesque dance which went considerably beyond the bounds of good taste, but was screamingly funny.

THE girl ducked out the wings, and Heydrick nodded to the waiter. The octopus man winked one of his three eyes and vanished. He came back through the door to the dressing rooms, and the girl was with him. He pointed to Heydrick. Klatthgar looked at him insolently. A puzzled frown wrinkled her face.

Lithe as a sand-leopard, she moved among the crowded tables, still clad in the gaudy costume of her last number.

Heydrick looked closely at her. Could this be the same girl who sang the love song so full of fiery passion that it was madness set to music? The uncanny warble of flutes and the triple throb of bone-drums still echoed in his ears. But this girl was tired; strain and unutterable weariness lurked behind her eyes.

"Why did you send for me?" she asked.

"I wanted to talk to you—is that so unusual?"

"Men always want to talk to me," she said, sneering. "I don't have to associate with the customers—not even those who can buy Moonfoam."

Heydrick noticed suddenly that the sand-leopard was with her. The animal's tail swished savagely back and forth. Its lips curled and a snarling burr of sound came from the ugly rows of teeth. It seemed like an echo of the girl's sneer. Klatthgar put down one hand to stroke the beast's spade-shaped head. It rubbed against her in silent ecstasy.

"Perhaps I can change your mind,"

suggested Heydrick. "Won't you sit down?"

"You flatter yourself," she snapped. "I can hear what you have to say standing up."

"I wonder if you can," Heydrick mused aloud. "First, who are you?" The ghost of fear trembled behind her mask.

Klathgar laughed. "Ask anybody who I am. Klathgar. The Red Leopard."

Heydrick threw Ria Tarsen's dossier card on the table, face up. Klathgar glanced at it without a flicker of emotion.

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?" she asked contemptuously.

"It should—it's yours."

Her laugh was shrill. "At least you have a new approach. In either case, you're mistaken. What's your racket?"

"Heydrick, I. P. S. If you're not Ria Tarsen, who are you? May I see your ident-card?"

The girl was growing angry. "It's in my dressing room; I'll get it."

Heydrick was on his feet. "If you don't mind, I'll go with you."

"I do mind."

"I'll go anyway."

The girl shrugged and led the way among the crowded tables, the leopard padding silently beside her. Curious glances went with them. Suddenly Klathgar turned. "On second thought, I have it here," she said. She knelt quickly and unsnapped the leopard's leash. Heydrick's hand reached for his gun, but the girl was holding a card out to him. Even as he took it, he wondered if the gesture were a trick to occupy his gun hand.

One glance at the card was enough. "I hope you didn't pay too much for this," he told her. "It's a clumsy forgery."

Klathgar muttered a low word to the leopard, then slipped through the sliding door of plastic. A bundle of furred muscle launched itself at Heydrick. It was touch and go for a minute. Deadly talons raked through the leather tunic like razors. The man got a grip on the jewelled collar and twisted savagely. He wrenched the great cat away long enough to get out a paralysis gun and fire it. The drugged needle went into a soft spot behind one furred

ear. Instantly the beast let go and crumpled.

Heydrick leaped for the door. Someone tried to trip him, but he got through and slammed the plastic door shut.

Cutting down the intensity of his blaster, he ran the blunt muzzle up and down the joint where the heavy slab of plastic fit, sealing it tightly as the plastic flowed and fused. "That should hold them," he thought. Something crashed against the door.

In the dim passageway, Heydrick could see several doors, all shut. Which door?

He tried three, then saw one marked with a glittering star. It was locked, but he put his shoulder against it and shoved violently. The thin screen buckled.

The girl was rummaging in a drawer. She turned and lunged at him with an ornamental dagger. Heydrick wrenched it away from her.

"Nice try, Ria."

She leaped on him, kicking and scratching. Locked together they crashed into the mirror. All three went down in a smash of glass. The girl lay still.

Heydrick took a needle from the paralysis gun and scratched her lightly. Her breathing steadied and she lay relaxed, while he opened the window and looked out. Below him, bathed in eerie Jupiter-light, lay the rooftops of the city. He could just make it to the next roof. Ria was lighter than she looked.

AT security police headquarters, Heydrick sat back for a quiet smoke. He had changed back into the crisp silvery grey of the Space Patrol. The inspector was in an official mood. He had his shoes on.

"What's the quickest transportation back to Mars?"

The inspector grinned. "Anxious to get her off your hands, eh? I don't blame you. The Martian Express is the quickest—you can get it at City 1. It doesn't stop, of course, but they pick up ore-lighters as they go past Ganymede."

"How can I get to City 1?"

"I'll lend you a patrol flier. They're all old crates, rocket drive. If it gets you there, you can leave it; we'll pick it up.

If not, maybe we'll get some decent equipment."

Heydrick walked down the dim passageway to the cell in which he had deposited Ria Tarsen. She glowered at him.

"Did you kill my leopard?"

"He's all right. Be stiff a couple of days, that's all. I used the paralysis gun. How d'you feel?"

The girl did not answer. Heydrick went on. "I'm sorry, Ria. I'll have to take you back now." He unlocked the cell, and the girl strode into the corridor. She was still arrogant and glared at him with cold insolence.

"You must feel proud of yourself," she said icily. "You'll never get me back to Mars."

"I thought of that." He took a metal bracelet from his pocket. "Try this on for size."

"That's a funny handcuff; it's not chained to anything," she said as he clasped it on her wrist.

"Try running away," he suggested. Ria darted down the corridor, then stopped as if she had run smack into a dur-steel wall.

"Magnetic," he explained. "Can be set for distances up to fifty feet. Once that's on you, and the mate to it's on me, we're linked together to the end of the trail. It's sealed with a coded beam of light. I don't have the combination. I just don't want you to try anything silly, that's all."

"I'll kill you for this," Ria promised, her green eyes glowing with ugly light.

"Seems you've killed one man too many now," Heydrick commented. "Even if you were lucky enough to kill me, we'd still be linked together; you couldn't escape with a corpse."

"I didn't kill Feyjak 9," she shrieked. "I didn't kill him. It was an accident. I don't know anything about it."

Heydrick looked at her soberly. "I don't believe you, Ria. And, if I did, it wouldn't matter. You were tried and sentenced. I'm sorry for you, but it's my job to take you back to the—to your punishment."

"I won't go back to the disintegrators," Ria stated, her face pale but tearless. "You'll never get me there alive."

IN the antiquated patrol flier, Heydrick set the auto-pilot for City 1. The girl was sleeping quietly under the effects of the paralysis drug. Heydrick went back to the galley and opened a can of hot coffee. A sudden tug at the metal circlet on his wrist sent him racing to the controls.

It was too late. The girl held a heavy bar of dur steel ready to crash it down on the maze of keys and switch-bars. The bar descended in a glittering crescent. Blue flame shot through the tiny cabin. Rocket jets fused and exploded at the tail of the rocket-flier.

The shock knocked Heydrick to his knees. He scrambled to the control board and reached for the girl. In one movement, she turned and struck at him with the bar. It missed his head, but a numbing jar went through his shoulder. A clip on the jaw sent her reeling.

Frantically Heydrick worked at the wrecked controls, splicing burnt wires, bending keys back to position. Sick nausea clawed at his insides. The ship was going down in a free fall, spinning. The thin atmosphere of Ganymede went round the hull with a crescendo, whistling scream. A jagged wilderness of saw-toothed rock and volcanic ash whirled up at the flier.

The slight gravity of Ganymede was bad enough, but if they struck at full rocket velocity, the hull would crumple like an eggshell. With a length of wire, Heydrick burned his fingers shorting the switches to the forward tubes. It was too late to do much. If he could only slow the fall.

A series of explosions forward jarred through the ship. Deceleration flung Heydrick on top of the girl.

The flier buried her nose in soft ash and skidded thirty yards in a choking shower. A sharp needle of jagged rock reached up through the dust to catch her. With a shriek of riven metal the flier rose on end. The fused quartz port-holes bulged and gave way.

Supercharged air whistled out of the cabin. As the artificially heavy air blew itself out, Heydrick felt his head swell as if it were going to explode. His eyes seemed to be squeezing out of his head.

Dazed, he groped to the locker and got out the space-suits. The cold bit into him like needles of ice till he struggled into his suit. He set his atmosphere control, then fought his way through the shattered wreckage to Ria. She was in no condition to resist as he forced the bulky space-suit on her. He set the controls on her suit, then talked into his microphone.

"You are a problem child," he said. "How'd you manage it?"

Ria was sick and dizzy. She staggered on her feet. "I had some benzedrine—stole it from the emergency kit. Your paralysis needle barely scratched me anyhow."

She fell weakly against the bulkhead. Heydrick seized her and dragged her through the riven shell of the control room into the shelter of a gaunt outcropping.

"The forward rockets are building up. They'll go any minute."

A bellowing geyser of dust-shrouded flame roared up. Flying metal clattered brutally on their shelter.

"Just in time," he said. Ria lay on the ground, retching weakly. "Well, the security boys get a new ship. They'll be happy. From here on, we walk. I hope you're satisfied."

The upper limb of an immense crescent rose above the horizon. Jupiter. Its sombre light revealed a savage wasteland of barren rock and volcanic ash.

"Come on, Babe. You should enjoy this. It's thirty miles, and the walking's bad. But we like it that way, don't we?"

Sulkily, Ria got to her feet and followed him.

THE Martian Express Liner, *Phobos*, went into full gear with a velocity of 89 Martian gravities. After detouring the dangerous asteroid belt, the ship nosed down in a long curving glide to intercept the orbit of Mars. Far ahead was a blurred crescent of red, glowing with soft radiance against a star-sprinkled void. Lee Heydrick watched the planet swing slowly across the field of the glass. A deep unrest troubled him, but he refused to face the mask it might wear and tried to force it out of his mind.

"We should be there in fourteen hours," the co-pilot said.

"That'll be a relief. This is one job I don't like."

The pilot glanced at them sourly. "I thought you were through with the service," he shot at Heydrick.

"I am—it's my last job. I can't live on any of the inner planets after being exposed to the zero-rays of outer space. It takes six months for a resignation to go through in the Space Patrol. My time is up in two weeks and four days. After that, I'll have to stick to the places outside the asteroid belt or resign myself to a very brief life—18 months, at the outside."

"Too bad. What're you going to do?"

"I don't know. Maybe settle on one of the Moons of Saturn. They aren't too crowded. I'll be glad to be free again. Silly, isn't it—when you think of the way I used to look forward to being in Space Patrol! My folks were refugees from earth—lived in the icy marshes near the northern ice-cap of Mars. I ran away from home to go to Canal City 9 and study for the Patrol. My grades were good enough to impress Tyko. He took me into his home. My folks were proud of me. They're all dead now; Tyko's all I have left. I'll miss the old buzzard."

The co-pilot grunted. "What are you kicking about? I wish somebody'd handcuff me to a kitten like that one of yours. She looks hotter than a rocket tube. If you get tired of your work, I'll take over and spell you awhile."

Heydrick grinned with embarrassment. "You might regret it. She's tried to kill me twice already. She's full of ideas."

"I hope she knocks you off—you can will her to me."

The alarms through the space cruiser began to shrill in great bellows of sound. Heydrick ran along the passageway and tried the door of the stateroom where he had locked his prisoner. It was still locked. He used the key, but something heavy was jammed against the door. He drew his blaster gun and cut down the intensity. The door glowed cherry red, then flowed together. It gave as he crashed against it.

Ria was posed dramatically, metal stool

in hand, in the act of trying to smash the port-cover. The fused-quartz pane was already spiderwebbed, and air sucked out in a rising whine. Ria changed her mind and flung the stool at Heydrick. He lunged under it and caught her round the waist. In one movement, he flung her over his shoulder and whirled back out to the passage. Dropping her in a heap, he clawed shut the insulated emergency door and spun the wing-nuts. Waves of cold licked his eyelashes and his fingers stung with frost before he got the job done.

While the girl's green eyes watched him warily, as a cat's might.

"I'm sorry you made it," she spat at him viciously. "I hate you—hate you!"

Heydrick spun the dials on the handcuffs. "Okay, kid, if you want to play rough, you'll sit out the rest of the trip on my lap. The interval is two feet, as of now."

"I hope you can take it." Then she snapped. Tears burst out. She raged and screamed and kicked, laughed and cried and choked at the same time. Heydrick slapped her out of it. She huddled on the floor, sobbing weakly.

The co-pilot came along the passageway. "Oh, it's your pet? We thought it might be."

"Still want to trade jobs?"

"It might be fun to spank her, but I'll skip it. I've news for you. We can't land in City 4—trouble of some kind—sounds like a good row."

"Do you know what's wrong?"

"They didn't say. Orders are to take the ship on the Desert City 12. You two can go down in the lighters with the freight." The co-pilot patted Ria on the shoulder—she cringed away from him. "Tough luck," he said gently. "Too bad you're stuck with Bighead here. If you were dealing with me, we'd go off to some empty asteroid and camp out for the rest of your life."

BROODING over the immensity of the plain below was Canal City 4. Covering the entire city like a tremendous bubble was the iridescent dome of fused-quartz. The tiny fleet of ore-lighters nosed

through the valves of airlock after airlock and headed across town toward the sprawling terraces of the freight docks. Like a chain of brightly silvered pumpkin seeds, the clumsy craft wound in and out among the towers of the 7th level, down to the freight docks.

Heydrick took his prisoner through the airlock in the freight terminal to condition her and himself for street-level atmosphere, then went out on the huge platform again.

Pausing only long enough to ask a robot attendant for information, Heydrick pushed the button to stop a descending elevator.

"Labor trouble—the workers are picketing—riots have broken out at street level," droned the mechanical voice of the robot.

A crowded car stopped, signalling raucously. Heydrick showed his badge to the robot pilot. "Street level," he said crisply. "Space Patrol priority." The robot grunted. "We have orders not to stop unless it's vitally necessary."

"It's necessary."

Jumbles of neo-plastic architecture, rising tier on tier above the series of terraces on which the city was built, whirled upward past the descending car.

On the street level, all was bustle and confusion. A polyglot crowd composed of every human and near human species in the universe jammed the streets. Stares followed the I. P. S. uniform as Heydrick pushed out of the elevator. A few people gave nods of respect, but in most faces burned a sullen hatred and resentment.

Ria followed him in stolid silence as the handcuffs tugged at her. The knots of angry people came suddenly in focus and she had a moment's desperate inspiration.

She jerked back heavily on the cuffs and began to scream.

Heydrick was caught off guard and spun sharply about.

"Help me, somebody," Ria cried wildly. "The cops are taking me in. I haven't done anything."

The mob clotted around the pair, snarling angrily.

Heydrick reached for his gun, just as somebody threw a spanner. He dodged, heard Ria's voice shout a welcome, "Thor-

san," and that was all. A sharp jab in his cheek as the paralysis needle went home was the last he knew. Darkness rushed over him in a smothering cloud.

SOMEONE kept slapping him. He felt as if he were trying to swim in thick syrup. The light on the desk shone blindingly in his eyes. He got his hand up to shield his eyes, then they struck it down. He blinked sharply awake.

Behind the desk sat a handsome man. Pale blue eyes that probed deeply, plump cheeks, thick blonde eyebrows, muscular shoulders. Heydrick had seen him before. Where? Oh, yes—the pieces clicked together. The Feyjak investigation. The man had testified against Ria Tarsen, reluctantly, the Visiphone News had commented. He had been Feyjak's assistant, Ria's friend.

Thorsan drummed the desk with his fingers. "Heydrick, you've given us a lot of trouble. You probably want to know where you are. You're in the underground galleries below Level 1. We have our headquarters here. I am the head man of the Wildings."

Heydrick's brain spun. He fought back the whirl and tried to think calmly.

Below the lowest inhabited level of Canal City 4 were endless mazes of caverns, galleries and abandoned mine-shafts.

Rumor said that bands of outlaws roamed among the savages, second and third generations of the outcast rebels who long-ago had been driven to the refuge of the city's ratholes. Banded together by their common hatreds, these outlaws had built up a strong organization known as the Wildings. There was some talk that numbers of them had infiltrated the City's government; men of dangerous ability, infinite cunning, and vicious philosophy, whose sole aim was the overthrow of the Government of Scientists.

Heydrick's heart turned suddenly to ashes as he realized that Ria Tarsen must have been a Wilding. Surely no group would have gone to the trouble of instigating riots merely to rescue an outsider, however innocent. It was all clear now, painfully clear.

Thorsan must have divined the nature

of Heydrick's thoughts. He laughed harshly, then turned to a subordinate.

"They're no use to us, either of them. The girl didn't know as much as I thought she did. Now they both know too much. We'll have to get rid of them. Put him in the cell with her while I figure out what to do with them."

Hands reached out of the darkness and dragged Heydrick roughly to his feet. He was thrust along a winding gallery that he realized must be part of an old mine. They must have given him a full dose with the paralysis needle. He kept stumbling, and his legs moved stiffly.

The group came to a halt before an old wooden-plank door. The room inside was damp, and smelled mouldy. It was evidently a chamber cut in the rock for storage of explosives. His captors thrust him inside. He bounced off a wall and fell heavily. The door bumped shut and a sound like a bar dropping in place came muffled through the planks.

"Well, tough guy, how do *you* like being pushed around?" A familiar voice came out of darkness.

"Who is it?" he asked needlessly.

"It's not your Aunt Sophie," the voice said acidly. "*You* should kick. You have better company than I have."

The two sat in moody silence for a while. "Are you all right?" the girl asked finally.

"Still stiff," he answered. "You should know what that's like."

"I do. You and your toy handcuffs. They only wanted me; Thorsan thought I knew he killed Feyjak. He was afraid I might give him away. They had to drag you along on account of your silly handcuffs. If you hadn't split my lip, I could laugh at you. They're going to kill us, you know."

"Yes, I heard him say that."

"What are we going to do? Any ideas?"

"Not so far. How about you?"

"Nothing definite. I still have the benzedrine tablets I swiped. They didn't find 'em when they searched me. I'll split with you. If we take it before they come for us, we may get a chance to make a break. It'll counteract the paralysis drug

if they're counting on that to make us dead pigeons while they haul us around."

Her hand found his in the dark and thrust six pellets into his open palm. Her fingers were wet and sticky.

"You're bleeding."

"It's nothing serious. That bracelet of yours cut my arm when they chiselled it off."

"I'm sorry about everything, Ria—"

"Skip it," she said harshly. "Of course you're sorry. Now shut up. I hate post-mortems. Besides, I think they're coming. Better get your benzedrine down."

THERE was sound of the bar being withdrawn. A heavy foot kicked the door open. A man with a twisted face held the light and the gun while two others approached warily and jabbed needles into the captives. Coarse hands jerked them to their feet, and the two were dragged outside, feigning limpness.

"Now," said Ria. She thrust out her foot. The man with the gun tripped and went sprawling on the floor. Heydrick swung with all he had at the darkness where he remembered a chin and felt bone shatter beneath his fist. Then he was tangled in a savage knot with the third man, rolling and threshing about in deadly fury.

Ria was not idle. She salvaged the light, switched the radilume back on, and hunted for the dropped gun. In a matter of seconds, she brought the butt down on an exposed skull. The thug let go and sank to the floor.

Heydrick dusted himself off.

"I ought to let you have it, too," Ria mumbled, "but I always was a softy. Come on, sucker."

"Which way?"

"I think they brought me that way," the girl said slowly. "Let's try the other. Heaven knows where it leads."

Heydrick took the gun from her and thrust it through his belt. They struck off down the tunnel, taking forks at random, but going as cautiously as they could.

Luck was against them. They came suddenly round a turn and into a chamber

full of Wildings. It was the room where Heydrick had been questioned by Thorsan. The man still sat the desk. Heydrick drew the gun and pressed its trigger as Thorsan dived for a doorway. The desk glowed, then exploded. The room was choked with dust.

Heydrick remembered a nightmarish pursuit, running down a series of criss-cross galleries with endless side passages. The gallery ended abruptly. An open mine-shaft barred their way.

It was a double shaft, with space for two elevators, but neither lift was on their level. Sounds of pursuit came from the gallery behind them.

Heydrick leaned over and looked down the shaft. A floor below was the open-platform lift.

"Jump for the cable," he ordered. "Try to slide down it."

"You first," she said. "I'm a sissy." Heydrick jumped and his stomach wrenched with nausea. Then the cable was burning through his hands. His feet stung as they came down solidly on the metal flooring. The girl was right behind him. He found the control lever and jammed it all the way over.

The car dropped under them with sickening speed.

A blaster beam flamed briefly above them, and the discharge set a chorus of echoes bouncing back and forth in the old mine-shaft.

"Hang tight," he shouted. "I don't know how far down this shaft goes. If we hit bottom at this speed, we'll flatten out like saucers."

A mushroom of brilliant light expanded above them. The car jerked and grated on the rock walls, then went down in a free fall, the cable trailing slack above them.

Down the shaft hurtled the old lift, air whistling eerily round its edges.

"They've blasted the cable!" Heydrick cried. "Now we are in for it." He leaped to the brake lever and tugged at it. The bar was rusted fast. Ria tried to help. With their combined weight and effort, the bar gave a little. Inch by inch, it moved. The clamps started taking hold of the side walls and a shriek of protest

came from rock and metal. The elevator slowed slightly. Too late.

With a grinding rasp of smashed metal, it struck. Ria was hurled clear, but Heydrick was trapped.

The metal cable came down, coiling and snapping like a whip. A stiff spiral of it covered Heydrick, pinning him fast to the floor. He wiped a smear of blood from his face and tried vainly to lift the heavy strands. They refused to budge.

Ria knelt beside him and tried to shift the coils, but it was no use.

"You'd better go," he said roughly. "They'll be down as soon as they can get to the other elevator...to make sure of us."

Ria glared at him. "It's my maternal instinct," she said. "I can't leave you."

"You wanted a chance to escape. This is it."

Ria seized the broken brake lever and pried up part of the strands. Heydrick worked himself part way out, but the weight was too much for her strength. The bar twisted out of her hands. Down came the full weight again. Heydrick cried out in agony. She moved the bar and lifted again. This time, he crawled free.

LEANING on her, he was able to stand and walk along the old gallery, but it was a slow business. Deadly slow.

Behind them, they could hear the whine of a descending lift. "They're coming," he said. Crouching against an angle of the tunnel, they waited. It was useless to run. Heydrick cut the switch of his radilume and braced the blaster against cold stone. He felt better with the trigger nestling against his trembling finger.

The Wildings came cautiously, but they needed light to move at all.

Light splashed off the rock around the corner. Shadowy figures moved behind the light. Heydrick pressed the trigger, and a pale beam flicked the darkness. In the close confinement of the tunnel, the shattering blast stunned their brains.

The explosion stopped some of the pursuit, but a scuff of boots on rough rock warned Heydrick. Needles from paralysis guns snicked nastily from the naked rocks beside them. He and the girl turned and

fled headlong through the darkness. Pain forgotten, he thrust Ria ahead of him, pried up part of the strands. Heydrick and followed, stumbling and swearing.

In the darkness ahead, he heard Ria cry out. Unable to stop, he too collided with what seemed to be a solid wall of metal. Heydrick flicked the radilume switch. Light flooded an ore depot, with rusting electric cars.

"Ore cars," he gasped. "Get in." He boosted the girl up and scrambled after her. Heydrick fumbled for the switch, found it. The car leaped ahead as a blaster beam licked the rails behind them. With shaking hands, Heydrick re-primed his blaster and fired wildly at the darkness behind them. Shadows danced. It seemed seconds before the blasts went off. Two in rapid succession.

Another car leaped from the dust cloud behind. It was pursuing them on the parallel tracks.

A blaster beam grazed the back wall of the ore-car. It was gone with a flash and a roar. The shock flattened Heydrick and the girl against the front wall. Heydrick re-primed his gun, but it was impossible to aim. The tracks went into a black maw and went up in a steeply climbing spiral. Flanges screamed wildly as the wheels bit into the curves. Up. Up. Up. The miles raced backward in a dizzy flow of darkness lit by faint reflections from the radilume.

Suddenly the track levelled off on a straightaway. Heydrick peered ahead. Heaven alone knew where the tunnel led or how far the tracks were good. The car was going like a runaway rocket.

Then they were out in the open, in daylight. The tracks came out of a tunnel-mouth on the banks of the dry canal.

The hurtling ore-car was half way across the bridge before Heydrick knew they were heading for the city.

Out of the tunnel-mouth across the canal shot the other ore car. Both cars raced toward the city.

Ten miles. Five. Three. One.

Weird lights flickered on the tremendous dome ahead, as if some infernal carnival was being held within the city.

Up a steep ramp to the air-lock shot

the cars. Seconds now. The airlock was closed.

A gate of metal and plastic loomed close. Glass, plastic, metal and quartz vanished in a thunderous melee of sound. The first lock. The city's automatic wall-magnets clawed at the racing car. It slowed rapidly. The deceleration pinned both of them flat against the front wall of the car. It went through the second gate like a knife through dough. The jar was agony.

The car rolled up to a dock and stopped.

Heydrick was out of the car and racing for a visiphone as a wobbling wheel came loose and romped down the track, smashing sheds to metal splinters.

"Get Tyko," he bellowed.

"Sorry," a robot said tonelessly. "No calls are going through till the end of the emergency."

Heydrick swore wildly. He and Ria ran through the building and out onto the huge terrace in front. The vast bowl of the city was in tumult. Fires were raging on all the lower levels, and several of the towers of the 7th level had crashed down in ruins. Mobs roared through the streets, killing, burning, and looting. It was revolution. Security police, trying to stem the outbreak, were caught in the maelstroms, overwhelmed, and submerged. The lower levels had gone mad with hate. Wildings were everywhere, organizing, leading, destroying.

Heydrick commandeered an empty flier, got Ria aboard and set the automatic pilot for Tyko's tower in West 21.

IN Tyko's tower, the old man stood watching the end of the grim spectacle in the streets below. Walls of white fire moved out in ever-widening circles from the experimental domes, moved through the city, quieting the mobs, herding them back to their homes. Dead lay in windrows.

A bell rang behind him. He turned. "Oh, come in," he said. It was Thorsan, Feyjak's assistant.

"It's almost over," Tyko told him. "Order is being restored now. After this, we'll keep the Blues in power and give

the people a government they can like. It's a sad thing, to govern people. Herding them about like animals. Men should be free. I'm an anarchist myself...out of hours."

"How about my people?" Thorsan asked, an odd expression on his face.

"Your people? Oh, the Red Scientists. Don't worry. We knew this revolt was coming, even if you Reds didn't. We've had our eye on the Wildings for some time. You Reds are safe enough. When order is restored, perhaps a joint government..."

Tyko stopped. He was looking into the muzzle of a blaster.

"I don't understand," he quavered.

"My people are the Wildings. We don't want any of your kind of governments," Thorsan said slowly. "With you out of the way, nothing can stop the revolution. I regret the necessity."

From the open doorway, Heydrick fired. The paralysis needle bit deep in Thorsan's neck. He crumpled silently.

Heydrick and Ria stood before Tyko.

"I see you've completed your mission," the old man said. He frowned as Heydrick put his arm around Ria.

Heydrick laughed. "When Thorsan comes out of it, give him scopolamine. He'll tell you who did kill Feyjak."

"I suppose you want my blessing? You have it."

"How's your war coming?"

"It's over by now. Nasty business, government. What are you going to do?"

Heydrick and Ria looked at each other.

"I think we'll find an empty asteroid and camp out for a while. The universe is getting too crowded. I'm glad she was innocent, Tyko. I could never have brought her in...for any reason."

"I wish I were young enough to go with you," Tyko sighed. "Not on your honeymoon, of course. I guess you won't be coming back. This is goodbye, then? Is there anything I can do for you?"

Heydrick started to reply but Ria cut in. "Yes, there is. I want another pair of those magnetic handcuffs."

Heydrick shrugged. "She has the maternal instincts of a buzz-saw."



But that blast gave Jay his chance.

ANIMAT

By BASIL WELLS

Battling Venus' slime and vicious frog-apes, J46 yet found time to wonder: Was he a man or an android?

FOR TOO LONG HAD THE *Sun Maiden* been plunging sunward, her meteor-crushed jets and warped plates feeling the relentless chill of space eating swiftly inward.

Past the orbit of Mars; down past Earth's sector of space, and into the pull of Venus she flashed, her pace quickening. And crew-members, sweating and hollow-eyed within the foul closeness of space

suits, worked desperately to repair that all-but hopeless damage.

Abruptly the forward jets flared raggedly. The great ship faltered; its course shifted planetward, and even as the clouds swallowed the *Sun Maiden* the first of the patched jets exploded.

The remaining rockets flared briefly and died. The captain jettisoned cargo and equipment before releasing the eight un-

damaged emergency vanes. The shrieking solidity of the Wet Planet's air ripped the sturdy blades away as though they had been tinfoil and the ship's fall remained unslackened.

The slanting plunge ended at last. The nose plowed down a rocky mountain slope, crumbling with the impact, caromed off a boulder-strewn bench, and ripped through a tree-clad lower level into a mossy-grassed meadow. There, in a soggy treeless hollow, the scarred hulk that had been the *Sun Maiden* came to rest . . .

JAY FORSIX turned puzzled eyes on the little knot of survivors beside the ship. His fair-skinned face was square, like his powerful short body, and there was red hair sprouting from beneath the gray plastin of his control case's helmet.

Jay looked like a man; he even talked, in a meager jerky fashion, like a man, but he was actually an android robot. Animats, Inc. turned out thousands of superior robots for the industries of Earth and Mars — durable, foolproof *expensive* machines they were. But for the uranium mines of Jupiter's moons they also had begun to create these inexpensive living blends of animate flesh and bone, synthetic moronic creatures.

"There are six animats—and us!" choked the little blonde haired girl. Already the constant moisture of the atmosphere coated her skin with shining dampness.

Her companion, a tall dark-skinned girl, rubbed a bruised elbow thoughtfully. Her teeth flashed in a rueful smile.

"Bottle the tears," she snapped at the blonde girl, slapping her shoulder, "we got plenty water without them."

The smaller girl drew herself up.

"Perhaps you don't know who I am. I'm Thela Draper. My father owns most of Animats, Inc."

The tall girl laughed. "X with me, Thela. We're in the same fix. No putting on a front—all we'll be doing is keep alive until help comes."

"If it does come." Thela Draper's lips quivered. "I want . . ."

"Will you shut up! I'm taking charge. [You're a spoiled empty-head even if you are atomic-plated. I'm not dumb even if

I do dance for a living in dives you'd blast clear of.

"Someday Ina Haan's name will be in all the lights of Mars and Terra."

Jay Forsix shook his head numbly from side to side as he heard the women talking. Strange thoughts and sensations were crowding into his brain. His hand went up to the bulky helmet that was designed to keep his synthetic body under the control of humans.

He gasped. The battery compartment was empty, its cover gaping. No wonder his uncontrolled senses were so active and his brain alive.

"Gone," he said to Ina Haan. He recognized her as the dominating character of the group.

Ina pulled out a trim platinum-washed expoder and leveled it at the animat. But her finger did not depress the little stud that would send the explosive needles of biaton into his body.

"Maybe an animat is dangerous without his controls," she mused aloud, "and then again . . . We'll see. I can always kill it later."

"Thank you, Ina Haan," Jay Forsix said clumsily.

Ina's dark eyes widened. It was rarely that a robot spoke without being addressed, and then it used the term Master or Lady.

"Get to work," she commanded, "salvaging food and clothing."

The animat nodded. He turned toward the battered port.

Ina was studying the serial plate on Jay's helmet. "Take the others along, J46," she said. "You are in charge of them."

Jay's heart pounded proudly. The human one had confidence in him. Never, in all the six weeks of his short existence, had men spoken a kindly word to him. To them he had been a stupid machine to be worked out in the radioactive mines of distant worlds.

"Yes . . . Ina Haan," he said.

"Onin Tufor," he ordered slowly, "Zee Fivotu, come . . ."

The animats rose from their mindless squatting and shuffled after him into the *Sun Maiden's* scrambled interior . . .

JAY AND THE TALL shambling animat called Onin Tufor were gathering the small, brown-husked fruit of the balloon-like *kreth* that grew on the slopes above the space ship. The fruit grew at the base of the swollen hollow globe, and on its stubby branches.

In the days since their landing the two girls and the animats had learned to eat, if not like, the edible berries and fruits of the eternally clouded world. And they had made two comparatively unharmed cabins snug and only slightly damp by sealing them with tough sheets of *kreth*.

"Would you boost me up?" asked Jay.

Onin stared at him stupidly. He answered nothing but commands. Jay swore, a habit acquired from the dark-haired human, and twisted open the battery case of the animat. He wrenched out the batteries and sent them hurtling into a nearby thicket of *nik-nik*.

"Ina Haan says we have good brains," he told Onin, "if we do not have them deadened by the control cases."

Onin was sniffing at the warm thickness of the Venusian air, his slowly awakening eyes studying the ten-foot circle of mossy grass and brush visible. His shoulders were straightening and his movements were steadier.

"She says it is peculiar that I know so many words and am so familiar with cities and machinery she mentions. It is as though that knowledge was placed in our brains when we were created."

Onin grunted something and started off into the *nik-nik* brush away from the invisible spacer. Jay followed, his hand on the crude metal club that Ina permitted him to carry.

"The ship's back this way." Jay touched Onin's shoulder. "And you forgot your bundle of roots and fruit."

Onin stopped and faced Jay defiantly. Something trembled on his lips and then he frowned, shaking his bony skull. He clawed at the strap, riveted securely under his chin.

"Off," he gurgled. "Take it off."

"And have your head blown off too? Not much. To protect the controls from tampering the technicians have planted explosives in the helmet. It's suicide."

Onin's fingers dropped away, his eyes thoughtful. When he spoke again his rusty uncertain voice was steadier.

"Let's go back," he said. "Later we may learn . . . how."

"How?"

"How to take them off." Onin was scowling again.

"The humans must not know your batteries are gone."

"No," Onin agreed, his deep-set brown eyes studied Jay. "Without the helmets we could be . . . like them."

Jay Forsix nodded. "I have thought of that, many times. But the women would know. They would tell, and we would be destroyed."

"They die too," the lanky one muttered, scowling. "Why not?"

"No," Jay hesitated. "No, I could not see Ina, or even the sulky one killed. And we know too little."

The lanky animat's brain seemed to be awakening swiftly now. He laughed.

"Already you think of yourself as a man," he told Jay. "You are in love with the tall female."

"Perhaps I am." Jay thumbed the line of his jawbone. "I feel a, sort of warmth . . . a happiness . . . when they are near."

Onin snorted out a disgusted exclamation. "Or perhaps you are like a dog worshipping its master."

Jay swung his fist at Onin's jaw. Onin dodged, grinning.

"You are wrong," Jay spat out. "I am a man!"

Onin shrugged. "All X here, *animat*. Call yourself a man."

"We will take all the batteries from the others," said Jay, disregarding Onin's jeer. "Perhaps the searchers will not find the wreck and we can go on living here. There are books and recordings to study."

Onin's mouth twisted. "Small chance. They know the ship crashed somewhere in this area. And with the Draper female aboard they'll spare no expense."

"I heard rocket motors yesterday," admitted Jay.

A sudden thud-thud of approaching feet warned them of another's advance. Jay gripped his club tighter and waited, crouching.

"A *butrad*?" Onin muttered, referring to the gray-skinned froglike natives of Venus.

"So far we've seen none of them," Jay whispered. And he found time to puzzle about the knowledge possessed by animats.

"Jay Forsix," called Ina Haan's deep voice guardedly.

The animat's weapon dropped. "No talking," he warned Onin.

"Yes?"

"Come back to the ship at once. There are frog men lurking around and they may try to rush us. I killed one."

"Killed one! That was a mistake, Ina," Jay told her. "If we could have made friends with them . . ."

The woman's dark eyes narrowed savagely. "I'm in charge of our party, animat," she snapped. "Remember what you are and who are your masters!"

Jay's blood ran hot. His nails bit deep into the palms of his hands as he bowed his head stiffly. His eyes were trained on the ground at the woman's slime-crusted boots. He swallowed with an effort.

"I remember," he said slowly, his voice colorless as a true robot's.

Ina's lips smiled triumphantly. Her eyes softened as she patted his shoulder possessively.

"You *are* a handsome brute," she said softly. "I could easily . . ."

Onin grinned at Jay sardonically and winked. Jay shifted uncomfortably. Her hand dropped and she pushed at his naked chest.

"Back to the ship!" Her voice snapped crisply as she led the way.

THEY reached the ship without incident and dumped their loads in the kreth-patched airlock that served as a warehouse. Then the two animats went along a dripping short corridor past the humans' cabin to their own quarters.

The other four androids were lying on dank heaps of nik-nik brush half-asleep. Two of them were huge-chested, brutal-featured animats, patterned after the sturdy peasant stock of Earth; the others were pale-eyed, sharp-nosed little men. One of the little animats sat up.

"I am awake," he said, his high nasal voice carrying a note of hysteria. "The hum that hurts my head is gone. I can think."

Jay looked at Onin and nodded. "Dampness must have finished the cells. Maybe a short circuit."

"They'll all be like this shortly," Onin agreed.

Jay released the battery case's cover and snapped out the compact square batteries. The sharp-nosed animat, D601, scrubbed filthy fingers across his chin. His pale eyes darted furtively around the ruined cabin.

"I'm hungry," he whined. "I'd like a powdered steak dinner and a glass of *blika*. I got plenty of starshine in my straps."

His eyes widened as his fingers searched his ragged trunks.

"Took me off," he shrieked. "All gone. Every credit."

Jay shook the screeching little man. "What do you mean—all your credits gone? How would an animat have anything of value?"

Desix Owun frowned and shook his head.

"I—I don't know," he finally admitted. "For a moment it seemed as though—I was not—what I am."

"Try to think; to remember," Jay urged. "I have a wild theory that maybe you remember more than you think. Why would the technicians implant knowledge of finance and credits in a labor robot's brain?"

A grunted oath brought Jay around on his heels. The larger of the two huge robots had Onin's skinny arm twisted up behind his back.

"Start degrading," his deep voice was rumbling angrily. "How'd I get here and who are you? You keeping me doped?"

Jay stepped across the heap of leaves to the giant animat's side. His heavy club of metal was poised ready.

"Slip him free," he ordered sharply.

"Blast me if I will," grunted the animat, giving the bony arm a sickening wrench. Onin Tufor screeched thinly.

Jay swung the club along the blunt-featured animat's skull. The animat belated like a wild bull. He released Onin

and clawed with dirt-caked fingers at his battered skull. Then he sprang at Jay.

Jay Forsix backed away and slipped to one knee. The blow he had just delivered had dented the big brute's helmet along its base but had failed to down him. He caught the thick body across his hips and flipped the animat's six feet into the side of the cabin.

The giant, Zee Fivotu, rumbled his primitive rage and rebounded from the wall to launch himself again at Jay. Jay swung his club across the brutal forehead and again above the ear. Zee Fivotu's helmet crunched in.

Jay fell backward to escape as much of the blast as possible. But there was no explosion. The helmet with its carefully guarded control case had somehow been rendered harmless by his blows!

He rolled over and to his feet—to see Zee Fivotu's back disappearing out the cabin door. He lunged after the animat but the giant android was out the lock before he could reach it.

HE was conscious of another presence in the outer airlock as his shoulder brushed something yielding.

"What?" demanded Thela Draper angrily.

"Zee went blot," gasped Jay. "Tried to kill Onin. And me."

The girl's small exploder snapped out of her wrist holster into her hand and she sent a stream of mosquito-sized explosive bullets after the animat.

A second later the all-pervading sea of fog had swallowed the apelike shape and she released the button. She jammed the weapon against Jay's middle.

"I knew we should have killed all of you animats," she said coldly. "Without controls you are unpredictable—less than beasts."

Jay's muscles tensed for the miniature bomb blasts that the pellets' impact would bring. Then he relaxed, laughing quietly.

"You know," he said, "you should be at least four feet away before you fire. And before you can get that far I'll have the gun."

6—Planet—Spring

The muzzle dropped away. Thela started to inch backward. It was common knowledge that a biaton needle's explosion nearby was dangerous. The whole magazine *might* explode in her hand—a blast as devastating as a case of ancient dynamite.

Jay's hand chopped across the girl's wrist. Her cry of dismay choked off abruptly and her eyes sparked contempt.

"Go ahead," she cried. "Kill me. That's all you animats know how to do. Work, eat and destroy."

Jay tucked the tiny wrist exploder into his soggy trunks' waistband.

"Not interested," he told her. "You better go back to your cabin and get another exploder. I'm keeping this one."

"No," Ina Haan's voice cut across the hostility of the tiny chamber laconically. "Give."

Jay shook his head. "I'm keeping it. And you better get another for Onin Tufor. I think we're about to have trouble."

As though to emphasize his words a prolonged ghastly shriek came from the fog. They heard broken shouted phrases, human words but with something bestial and terrible in their anguished pleading. The screams rose higher and higher—and choked off until almost inaudible.

The women's faces were pinched and terrified. They pressed close to Jay, forgetting that he was a man-made creature—a robot of living flesh—in their instinctive urge for the protection of the male.

"That was Zee Fivotu," he said soberly. "The Frogs have him. Probably tore him apart . . ."

"We'll be next," said Ina Haan, her voice thinned.

"Guard the lock, Ina," ordered Jay. "I'm going back after the animats. We'll need them all."

Ina Haan made no protest to Jay's assumption of authority nor did he think it strange that he should take control. From somewhere in his acquired memories he had dredged up adequate knowledge of the butrads' methods of attack.

He raced back through the corridor to the animat cabin. Onin was grinning, his long bony face alight.

"I've found how to remove the helmets,"

he cried, "by inserting a small rod that locks the lever resting against the skull. We . . ."

"No time for that now," he told the animat, paying no heed to the battered control case Onin held gingerly in his long fingers. "The Frogs are attacking!"

THEY sprawled atop the wreckage of what had been the *Sun Maiden*, their puny expoders sending their explosive needles at the blurred shapes that crept out of the fog's pall.

Down below the two women guarded the airlock with the two other expoders, and with them waited the club-armed animats.

"Y'know, Onin," Jay said, touching the button that sent a short burst into the butrads crawling closer, "I'm beginning to believe that we're not animats."

The lanky animat gulped. "Huh? You think we're human?"

"Sounds reasonable. Your knowledge of the control case—of which I'd know little or nothing. And I know about the butrads, all their little strategies. Even Venus seems familiar."

"But we don't know our own names. Just numbers. I'll confess I know little about Venus or its fauna. But I remember Blake City on Mars. I can describe the laboratories of the university."

Jay stitched a burst of needles across a trio of the grotesque froglike natives. Two flattened where they lay to move not again and the third raced for the fog's shield.

"In other words our acquired memories are different." Onin thumbed his huge nose leaving a mossy green stain. "But, of course, we may have been subjected to different training schedules before our—'birth'. Perhaps we had instructors with different backgrounds transmitting through the mentamit."

Jay snorted. "Individual instruction? No! Uniformity is the rule for all robots. Any deviation is avoided. A mentamit recording is more probable, teaching the simplest rules of behavior and obedience."

Onin's weapon spat its lethal needles in short steady bursts. Jay shifted so he could help his comrade stem the approach-

ing rush of butrads. They came on, out of the grayness, an undisciplined mob, waving clubs and spears as they ran, their purple-rimmed mouths croaking insults.

The two expoders slashed at them. Twenty of the hideous brutes fell, writhing and crying out thickly in pain, before the attack fell apart and disintegrated.

"Last attack they'll make today," said Jay. He examined the meager supply of needles in his magazine and shook his head. "It's almost night and they stick close to their nests with darkness."

Onin looked up from checking his own ammunition.

"Almost gone," he said glumly.

"Jay," a voice called from below.

"What is it, Ina?"

"Water's coming into the ship. We're in a foot of water now."

Jay turned to the north where the river's invisible course snaked. A brook had rolled muddily past the ship and through the hollow where it lay before from the western mountain slope but now a swollen water stream had joined it.

"The Frogs have breached the river and are flooding us out!" he shouted. "Probably they've damned the lower outlet. We'll be under water by morning!"

Onin swore in amazement. "They can swim underwater and attack. And with our guns empty . . ."

"We could make a stand up here," Jay mused, "but they'd starve us out. All we can do is slip away in the darkness and hide."

Onin looked over the side, gauging the height of the water.

"By another hour," he said, "we'd have to wade through ten feet of water." He stood up, flexing his skinny arms. "Better go now."

"And have them see us? We've two space suits left intact. They'll serve as diving suits. Using them we can escape unobserved."

"I'll get them ready," Onin offered. He started to climb back through the shattered spacer's gaping plates.

"Better get the biaton out of that helmet," Jay suggested. "We can make a few hand grenades out of it. We'll probably need some."

"We will," agreed the lanky animat. "Our own helmets will supply some more. I'll bring a rod up and we'll get rid of them."

THE dirty gray dawn of Venus caught the little party of humans and animats high up on the slope of the mountain. The fog was thinner here and as the light increased they had come upon a shallow fairly dry cave that opened above a narrow brush-covered bench.

Their escape had been without incident, a series of weary walks underwater, two going out and one returning dragging the empty suit. The heavy suits they were forced to abandon at the water's edge before starting the climb upward along the rain-washed ledges.

Tired though she was Ina Haan's eyes were bright.

"It's wonderful," she told Jay, "to learn that you are not an animat. This is the break I've always been looking for."

Jay was puzzled by the girl's excitement. He could not imagine why she was so pleased. Maybe she had fallen in love with him. At the thought he felt his heart pound faster. She was very desirable despite the tattered wisps of garments that half-covered her firm breasts and shapely woman's body—or perhaps it was because of them.

He took her in his arms and kissed her. She did not resist him, but surrendered her lips at once. Her eyes were dreamy.

"You love me," he said. "We'll be mates!"

Ina smiled mysteriously and leaned back against his chest.

"We must take the expoder from Thela," she said. "She might try to kill you to keep the secret of Animats Incorporated from the public. She'd want to protect her father."

Jay nodded, looking back into the cave where the other girl slept. "He'll probably go to prison or be shipped off to the asteroids," he agreed, "when we report this affair."

Ina's eyes narrowed.

"You must say nothing to anyone if we are rescued," she told him. "The company would probably have you murdered

before you reached the government heads of Earth or Mars."

"What's to keep her from telling them, then?" demanded Jay.

"I think she's going to keep quiet," Ina smiled. "Just let me handle it my way."

Jay stared down into the foggy plain that extended outward for perhaps fifty feet from the cave mouth before it merged with the eternal gray blanket. Somewhere down there the Frogs would be swimming to the deserted space ship—searching it.

"I wish I knew who and what I was before the company scientists worked on my brain. Was I a criminal or a political refugee? Or did they pirate a spacer I was on?"

"It is a profitable racket," mused Ina. "Taking humans and making robots out of them. Cheaper than creating and educating androids. Probably they made a few of the real article too."

Jay nodded sleepily. He wondered how many human beings had been condemned to the certain death of the uranium mines of Jove's satellites.

Ina went back into the cave to sleep and he sat there on guard. Yet he was weary and his head started to droop. In a moment he would have been asleep.

A soft hand trembled on his shoulder. He turned, thinking Ina had come back. But it was Thela Draper.

"I heard," she said, her voice strained but low. "I want you to know Ina is wrong. If Father's company has been breaking the laws I want it known. I know Father would do nothing wrong."

"You wanted to kill us when we first landed," accused Jay.

"But I thought you were uncontrolled robots—not men!"

"Lucky Ina didn't agree with you," grunted Jay wearily.

"Jay," cried the girl, her eyes moist, "please believe me. I have regretted saying what I did every day we have been marooned here. Animat or man, you are worth a hundred ordinary men."

"Save your flattery for those who want it," said Jay gruffly. "You're not fooling me. Ina knows what you are. Get back to bed."

Thela's eyes flashed. "I hate Ina. She's

cruel and scheming. She's only using you!"

Jay pushed the girl away back toward the damp heap of hastily gathered leaves and brush where she had been sleeping. He heard her sobbing^d for several minutes before she again dropped off.

And the pale gray light outside strengthened . . .

HIGHER and higher they climbed the mountain slope. The cave where they had rested now lay hundreds of feet below. The fog thinned and the glow of the swollen sun was a brighter blur above them. They could see for more than a hundred feet on either hand and above.

"Spacer should find us easier up here," Onin said. "If we can only find a plateau or wide bench where they can land. And the two rocket flares I brought along should help."

"We might even find an abandoned trading station," Jay told him. "Before the Frogs became hostile several hundred of them were built in the uplands. A few of them are still in operation, or were at the period I seem to recall."

"I hope," said Onin fervently, "we'll find a fort or spaceport."

"Could be, but we haven't stumbled across any discarded elastin cartons," was Jay's dry rejoinder. "They're stacked buckle-high around most settlements on Venus."

The little man, Desix Owun, came breathlessly up from the rear of the straggling party.

"I saw Frogs on our trail," his high voice shrilled, "hundreds of 'em. Gimme a stitcher."

Jay chuckled at Onin's raised eyebrows. "Means an expoder," he explained. He turned to the ex-animat. "Ina has an extra gun, the one Thela had. Tell her I said to give it to you."

Desix Owun's shifty eyes gleamed delightedly. He hurried down to where the two women toiled upward.

"I'm going back with the grenades, Jay," the lanky man said. He took a swipe at his huge nose. "Keep clinbing while I cover the rear."

"I'd rather go back," objected Jay.

"Some of them may have gone ahead of us," said Onin grimly, "and they'll be pushing rocks and spears down at you. We're trapped here on the slope."

Jay could see the logic of the older man's words. He climbed upward along the broken trail of ledges and watercourses more swiftly.

And emerged suddenly, between two towering walls of shattered pink and black stone, on the edge of a grassy plateau-like expanse—the flattened top of the mountain they were ascending! He turned to call down to the others, and a spear grazed his shoulder.

From below three explosions, raggedly spaced, told of the effectiveness of the crude grenades. Then he turned to face the unknown enemies of the plateau.

They were butrads like those on the trail below, unlovely web-footed batrachians with the spraddled two-legged bodies of uncouth humanoids. Twelve of them were, all armed with spears, clubs and knives of bone.

He fired carefully, husbanding his dwindling store of explosive needles. And they went down, one after another, until only one croaking giant remained on his feet.

It was then that the trimmer key jammed.

He worked with fog-wet fingers, not aided in the least by the sweat that suddenly began to drip down his arm and fingers, to clear the key. It was ticklish work for the exposed speck of biaton might explode at too rough contact.

The Frog raced closer, his ghastly purple-rimmed eyes and mouth strained, and his croaking warcry booming triumphantly.

There was an explosion of rockets overhead, growing more audible with every second; the butrad, hearing the sound, slowed his pace momentarily. That instant gave Jay time to holster his little expoder and snatch up one of the clumsy spears at his feet.

He threw the weapon, scooped up another, and flung it. Both spears found sleek gray flesh, one in the stomach and the other in the batrachian's neckless throat. The giant Frog staggered and

lurched forward uncertainly. Jay's fist swung up, smashing into the broad noseless face, and the native went down.

One by one the three animats and the two women climbed to where he stood. He saw Onin hurl a last grenade downward and then climb upward again. The bony-framed man's breathing was ragged as he reached the level and blood was dripping off his limp left hand from a spear wound in his shoulder.

Onin sank down on the rocky level ground beyond the riven rocks. He groped in his pouch with his good hand.

"The rocket flares," he murmured huskily.

The distant thunder of jets had swelled louder. There were several ships, Jay decided, the cadence of their rockets differed. In a matter of seconds they would be almost directly overhead.

He ran out into the undulating grassy flat, knelt, and twisted off the flare's cap. He adjusted the height for six thousand feet and depressed the firing stud. The rocket flare sped skyward, growling unevenly as its speed built up.

A moment later a mushrooming blossom of orange light rode above them.

Rocket jets hammered, after a long instant of suspense, out a one-three-two burst of fire. The signal had been seen. Jay shouted. He sent the other flare blasting heavenward to guide the ships.

From the rocks at the rim a burst of expoder fire sounded

INA HAAN stood over the three animats, two of them still helmeted. Jay and Onin had not yet found time to free the men from their encumbering explosive-laden control cases. Their bodies were torn open by expoder needles.

"What happened?" he demanded as he raced closer.

"They attacked me," Ina said calmly, "and I was forced to kill them."

"She lies!" Thela cried out. "She shot them down. So they couldn't talk. She's going to blackmail Father—use the money to make her famous."

Jay read the truth in the hard smile the dancer flashed him. She tipped up a de-

fiant chin. And the little expoder in her hand swung to cover Thela and himself. She planned to blackmail Animats Incorporated, once clear of Venus, and their lives meant little to her.

She nodded. "Better throw in with me, Jay. We can both be rich—on Animats credits. After what they did to you it's only right."

"And keep my mouth shut about this traffic in hunted men?" Jay exploded. He shook his head. "I'll rot in prison first."

"You'll not have the chance, Jay." For a brief moment Ina's eyes were soft and pleading. "We could have plenty fun together on all that stardust . . ."

"Even if she kills you," Thela broke in, "I'll talk. I'd rather see Father in prison than . . ."

"You're both fools," said Ina Haan wearily, and the expoder swung up. Her face was twisted now into something not quite human.

Her finger moved to depress the firing stud. There was an explosion on the rocks directly behind her and she spun about toward its source. It was Onin Tufor's weapon that had fired the needle. The dying animat had aroused from his stupor long enough to loose but one ill-aimed shot. And that shot had missed.

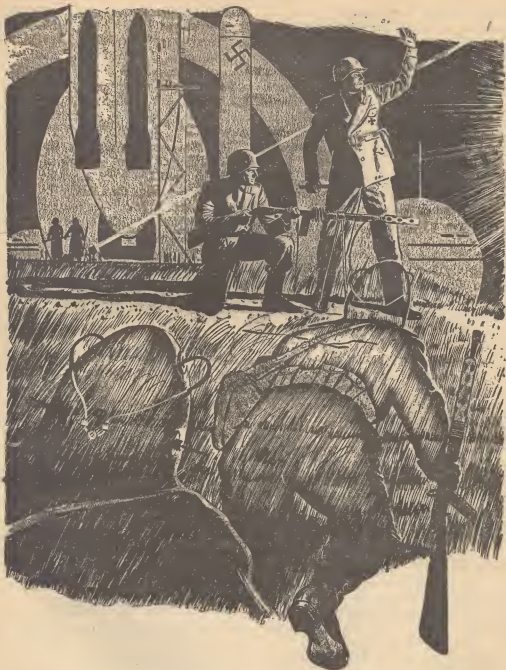
The dancer's explosive needles ripped the lanky man's torso into shreds.

But that split second of death gave Jay the opportunity he needed. He sprang at Ina, knocked her expoder spinning, and the edge of his palm smacked hard along the line of her neck. She dropped, unmoving, and Jay knotted her wrists together with a pack strap.

Thela came to him, and not far away the stratocars, surface ships equipped with radar and scanning scopes for work inside the Venusian cloud envelope, were grounding. In a few moments they would be bound for civilization again.

"I meant it, Jay," said Thela softly, her breathing shallow and unsteady. "No matter what comes—I'm blasting along with you."

With his arm around her waist the chunky man who had been an animat awaited the coming of the rescue party.



Hostage of Tomorrow.

By ROBERT ABERNATHY

Was Earth on the wrong time-track? Ray Manning stared as nation smashed nation and humans ran in yelping, slaving packs under a sky pulsing with evil energy—and knew the answer lay a hundred years back. Could he return?



They rose and charged toward the space ship.

IT WAS THE END OF MARCH, and the wreck of the Drtten Reich lay in colossal ruin across Europe, where people were only beginning to crawl out of their burrows to face the job of rebuilding a world for better or worse. In Germany itself, the Allied Armies, driving forward behind the iron spearheads of their aircraft and their armor, were closing in to smash the still-defiant nucleus of the old world that had been for worse.

One column consisted of two jeeps and a canvas-backed truck, bounding and

swerving at reckless speed over a rutted road that wound upward and deeper into the fir-shadowed Schwarzwald.

"Reconnaissance," grunted Ray Manning, between lurches of the transport truck. "They might have called it treasure hunting."

"Huh?" said Eddie Dugan, planted solidly and insensitively beside Manning on the jolting wooden seat. He took his eyes off the knees of the soldier opposite and searched his buddy's face. "What's the treasure?"

"Brains," explained Manning succinctly. "While the rest of the Seventh goes on handing body blows to the enemy, we're going after his gray matter. Brains are about the only article of value left in this bombed-out country. And Dr. Panraz Kahl has one of the best."

"What's he keeping it in these woods for?" Dugan glanced out at the receding park-like scenery, green now with spring.

"Unless the jerk they picked up back in Freiburg sold Intelligence a fairy story, the Herr Doktor had some kind of a hide-out here, where he was doing experiments—something that impressed the Nazis enough they were willing to finance him and leave him alone."

Dugan looked properly impressed. Of course, he had learned to expect such knowledge from Manning, who had been at M.I.T. and had managed to stay a combat soldier only by the grace of God and a lot of blarney . . . Dugan was still looking impressed when the truck scuffed tires to a halt. Then he was first man out, and the rest of the troops followed in seconds—they needed no telling to get out of a stationary vehicle.

"Road ends," somebody remarked. It did, in a loop that took it back the way they had come. The lieutenant in charge of the detachment swung out of the lead jeep and called them together under the trees.

"We'll have to spread out," declared the lieutenant. "Groups of three. That hideout ought to be within a mile of here. If you find it and there's resistance, keep shooting at intervals and wait for the rest. Remember, we've got to make captures this time, not kills."

The sergeant rattled off names and the groups formed swiftly and took off. Manning and Dugan, naturally, were two corners of one trio; its third was a corporal named White.

WITH Dugan as point, they advanced up a brush-grown ravine, using caution and cover, skirting the path that curved up the hill. They topped a saddle, and saw the house—a sprawling mountain lodge, built of logs by somebody with a passion for privacy, its roof well camou-

flaged now with synthetic greenery—not a hundred yards away up a slight slope rankly overgrown with grass. It looked deserted. Dugan had taken a few steps into the open before something—perhaps a far-away tinkle of breaking glass—warned him, and he went down smoothly in to the grass and rolled sidewise toward a clump of young evergreens.

From the house came a splitting crack and a bullet hit the ground where he had been. Behind him, Manning jumped behind a comfortably thick tree-trunk, unslinging the automatic rifle he carried. But White was a moment too slow. The second bullet caught him as he turned, and he stumbled to his knees; two more shots rolled echoes down the ravine, and White collapsed on his face.

Manning sighted his automatic and gave the window from which the fire had come a short but intensive burst. The house was silent. He fired again at a venture; in answer, a bullet snapped past, coming from a different spot. There was more than one marksman up there, or one was moving fast.

From ahead came Dugan's voice, low-pitched but carrying. "Cover me, Ray. I'm gonna crawl around to the back."

"You damn fool, you don't know how many there are. Our guys'll be along in a few minutes."

"Hell with them," said Dugan. "Just cover me." He didn't mention White. But there was a compressed fury in his voice.

Manning sighed: "All right."

Dugan crawled like a weasel. Manning lost sight of him. He waited with humming nerves, firing spaced shots into the enemy's log fortress.

Then he noticed he had stopped drawing any return fire. That might mean things had started happening inside the house, if it wasn't a trick—He discarded most of his caution and darted into the open, zigzagging from scanty cover to cover—something must have happened inside—and flattened against the rustic wall beside one shattered window, just in time to hear a voice beyond it exclaim hoarsely, "Gut!"

That was all he wanted to know. If anything was going *gut* in there, it was

time Ray Manning got into the picture. He cleared the window-ledge with automatic level.

There was a big, raftered room, and in the middle of the floor Eddie Dugan was struggling groggily to get up, while behind him stood a white-goateed civilian with a wrench, and in front of him a tough-looking younger man was lifting a rifle.

The two Germans saw the gun in Manning's hands and made a tableau as they were. It was broken as the burly one's grip relaxed and his Mauser clattered on the floor.

Manning motioned toward the goatee. "Dr. Kahl? Better drop that," he advised in German.

The little physicist looked down at his wrench and let it fall with an expression of disgust. Then he glared at Manning and called him a couple of names culled from biology rather than physics. "If your man hadn't caught Wolfgang reloading—As it is, you have interrupted my work at the most crucial point imaginable—a work that might yet save the Reich—" He woke up to the nature of his audience, and finished lamely, "And which is in any case the greatest scientific advance of all time."

Dugan got shakily back to his feet, scooped up his dropped Browning, and trained it on Wolfgang. "Is that Kahl?" he inquired sourly. "If I'd known this guy wasn't the one we had to capture, I'd have let him have it when I first got the drop on him."

Manning didn't answer. His eyes roved rapidly about the interior, alert against another surprise entrance; but anybody else on the premises was lying pretty low. One, in fact, was doing it just under the window Manning had first fired at. He was no longer a factor.

One end of the room was storage space for the overflow of Kahl's electrical equipment. Manning recognized some of the articles there and read the labels on a couple of crates, but they gave him no clue to the Herr Doktor's world-shaking research. The door behind Kahl was ajar on a room that, from what showed, might be his laboratory . . .

THEY'D taken the required prisoner, and all duty called for now was a short wait until Intelligence took him off their hands. But Manning's curiosity was needled. Kahl wasn't modest about whatever he'd done—but his wrath at the "interruption" was genuine, and there might really be something here. The soldier in Manning fought a brief battle with the student, and lost.

"What is this work of yours?" He made his voice authoritatively crisp, over the automatic's steady muzzle.

Kahl glanced momentarily toward the open door, then glowered at the American for a long ten seconds. "It is not for barbarian eyes."

"So there's something worth seeing—or a booby trap, maybe?" said Manning to himself. Aloud he snapped, "Suppose you show us what's in that room. Ahead of me—no, let Wolfgang go first. Keep him covered, Eddie!"

Dugan hadn't been able to follow the conversation—his German was limited to "*Komm heraus mit die Hand in die Luft!*" and a few other useful expressions from the American Tourists' Phrase Book, 1945 edition—but he didn't question Manning's wisdom. He did a silent and highly efficient job of shepherding Wolfgang through the doorway, and stood well aside as Manning followed, preceded by a cowed-looking physicist.

Manning was all eyes for Kahl's invention; his first impression was that the room was disappointingly small and bare. There was nothing that looked like a rocket motor, a guided missile, or even an improved submarine periscope. But then the American's eyes narrowed as they took in what was there.

There were no windows, and walls, floor and ceiling were metal or sheathed with metal. Around them ran what looked like medium-thick pipes, without openings or discernible use. The only furniture was a table, supporting a rather fantastic electrical setup—stuff in the thousands of megacycles, judging by the heavy dielectric tubes and coils that were just a copper twist or two; that was what Manning had glimpsed from outside.

Then a movement jerked Manning's

gaze back to the prisoners—and he almost shot the Herr Doktor. For Kahl had contrived to halt near the apparatus-laden table, had taken one quick step and thrown a switch.

The damage—if damage there was—was already done; that thought stayed Manning's trigger finger. But nothing seemed to have happened; only when the contacts had touched the light had flickered briefly, and something had made a deep humming sound that rose in pitch like an electric motor starting under load—rose and snapped off in an instant.

But something stayed wrong. The unconscious faculty of observation that had been sharpened for Manning in shell-smashed towns where the ability to notice small wrongnesses might keep a man from touching off a hidden mine told him that . . . He tried to read the expressions of the two Germans. Every wrinkle on Kahl's face beamed crafty triumph. But his helper's look made Manning blink. Wolfgang's Aryan-blue eyes bulged with panic. And they were staring past Manning, at the door.

Eddie Dugan broke the tense silence. "Ray—where's the light coming from?"

That was it! "Watch them!" rasped Manning, and whirled to face the door.

It was ablaze with green-gold sunlight.

II

AND BEYOND IT WAS NOT THE gloomily raftered feast-hall of a Nazi baron, with gray March outside its windows—but a woodland rich with high summer. A breeze stole in from that preposterous outdoors and brought warmth and scent of firs, and of something else . . . Suddenly there was a crashing in the thicket, a thud of racing hooves. "A deer," said Manning stupidly. "Something must have scared it." Dugan, sweating with his back to the door, relaxed slightly.

Like an echo from behind Manning came a dry cackle of laughter. He faced about again; his glare stilled even the Herr Doktor's hysterical glee.

"All right, how'd you do it?" he snapped in English, then, with returning control: "*Erklären Sie das sogleich!*"

"Gern," grinned the scientist. "This room, all of it, is my invention. It was built into the house, but when I closed the switch, it moved, and left the house behind."

"Where are we, then? No riddles!"

"It is simple enough. What you see outside is the world of the future—no longer future to us, but present, though about a hundred years removed from the 'present' which we have just left. This room is my time traveler—*der Kahl'sche Zeitfahrer!*"

Meantime Dugan had taken a look out the door. He said nothing, but his eyes grew larger and larger in a paling face. Manning told him, tersely and without comment, what Kahl claimed to have done; in his own mind he had already accepted it as truth, the only possible explanation for the seeming impossible. He said stonily to the German: "The demonstration of your invention is very interesting. But now we must deliver it to American Intelligence, who will appreciate your genius. Set the machine to take us back where we came from."

"I could not if I would," retorted Kahl. "Because of your interference, I had no opportunity to make adjustments. I merely threw the activating switch, and the *Zeitfahrer* exhausted its power before coming to a stop. You see, the switch is still closed. Only the field has collapsed as the batteries went dead."

There was a sound like a sob. It came from the hard-faced Wolfgang. The man's patent terror was more convincing than Kahl's assertions.

Manning eyed him coldly, inwardly surprised at his own reaction to the news that they were stranded. Perhaps he was still dazed by the incredible—but his chief emotion was a waxing excitement and wonder at the thought of seeing with his own eyes that world of the future about which people dreamed and speculated, cursing the shortness of their lives . . .

Dugan had guessed more than he had understood the meaning of Kahl's words. But to him the situation suggested more routine concerns.

"Say, Ray," he inquired, "do you suppose we're AWOL?"

"I don't think so," Manning choked down an impulse to wild laughter. "No more than a guy that's blown off his post by an 88. Anyway, I don't remember any General Order that says you've got to be in the right year. But our program now will have to be: get oriented in this place, this time, I mean, and dig up some fresh batteries to send this thing back to 1945. In the twenty-first century batteries shouldn't be scarce; we'll just have to be careful about contacting the natives, so we don't get tossed in jail or the booby hatch . . . To begin with, let's get out of here. This damn traveling vault is getting on my nerves." He motioned at Kahl and Wolfgang. "Outside."

Kahl didn't stir; his eyes narrowed slyly. "There is no sense in your treating us as prisoners, now. The war is ancient history."

"Until further notice," said Manning, "we'll continue as of 1945. Move!"

Grudgingly they moved. Kahl growled over his shoulder, "One thing does not seem to have occurred to you. This is *Germany* of the future, where Wolfgang and I are much more likely to find friends than you are."

MANNING did not answer. He had halted, stiffening, on the time machine's threshold, and sniffed the air critically. To him came sudden recognition of the scent which mingled, strengthening, with that of spruce and fir: a heavy, tarry odor of burning. He looked upwind. Through the rifts of the treetops were clearly visible clouds of black smoke, boiling upward against the blue sky. Flames flickered angrily beneath, and to Manning's ears came the faint but subtly all-pervasive crackling of the fire. It was drowned out briefly by the alarmed croakings of a flight of ravens that circled overhead and then flapped away, and in the relative stillness that followed another sound was audible—that of human voices, raised in shouts and commands.

"Looks like the local fire department's on the job," remarked Dugan.

"The fire!" exclaimed Kahl hoarsely. "It is blowing toward us—If it reaches the *Zeitfaher*—"

"Guess the man's right," said Manning. "If that is the fire department, we'd better get in touch with them." All four started to run, quartering across the visible face of the blaze toward the voices' source.

They had covered a hundred yards when from ahead, sharp above the snapping flames, a shot spanged. The two Americans instinctively hugged the ground; Kahl and Wolfgang, in advance, froze and stared at the screen of firs. From just beyond exploded a violent fusillade, with the hasty clatter of automatic fire setting the tempo; and in the midst of all the shooting was the noise of a racing motor and a rackety whir that could come only from spinning propeller blades.

The sound rose and seemed to hang overhead. Manning looked up and thought for an instant that he glimpsed the dark moving shape of a flying thing; but when he looked straight at the spot there was nothing. A moment later he was conscious that the roar of the engine had ceased and with it the noise of firing. The crackle of the forest fire came as from far away to deafened ears.

Dugan and Manning looked blankly at one another. They got to their feet and stood in indecision.

"Damned if I know," said Manning bewilderedly. "For a minute I thought we'd landed in the middle of another war. Now I don't know whether it was real or—"

"*Halt!*" barked a keyed-up voice on their right. "*Still-gestanden, oder ich schiesse!*"

The man who had appeared from the bushes, despite the unfamiliar uniform he wore, was at least real. So was the Tommy gun he trained on the group, and the look of vicious eagerness that twisted his face.

"*Das Gewehr fallen lassen!*" he shouted.

"Better drop it," said Manning quietly to his companion. "We don't know what the score is yet. And that guy *wants* to shoot."

Other uniformed figures appeared behind the first man. All of them were armed and looked excited and dangerous. But surprising was the caution, amounting to anxiety, with which they fanned out and kept their weapons leveled; they

seemed to expect some formidable and disconcerting counterattack from the disbanded and outnumbered captives.

The first arrival jerked a thumb toward the way he had come; his manner didn't encourage protest. And Manning, who had read science fiction stories, reflected that a time traveler's best bet was to keep his mouth shut.

Beyond the fir grove a meadow-like clearing opened out. Smoke was drifting across it and the fire licking at its edges, but that didn't seem to be what was bothering the men who swarmed about it. Some of them were squinting into the bright summer sky, nervously fingering guns, others arguing in loud groups. A crowd clustered about a helicopter which perched on the grass with, slowly revolving vanes. Toward it the four prisoners were marched.

UNDER the intermittent shadow of the helicopter's blades a big man in curiously patterned civilian garments stood with arms akimbo, facing a soldier who was ramrod-stiff and obviously embarrassed before him.

"There was no chance, Herr Schwinzog," the latter was insisting. "They wore *Tarnkappen*, and they were inside the machine and had the engine going before we knew that anything was wrong. We fired on them as they rose, and they made the helicopter invisible. Of course, then it was too late to stop them—without shutting off the power over the whole district, and that would mean chaos—"

"Of course it was too late," said Herr Schwinzog biting, "since it was already too late when you started thinking. You may as well put your report in writing, Captain, and hope that your superiors don't see fit to demote you. For my part, I shall use my influence to see that they do."

He pivoted, grinding his heel into the turf, and snapped at the man at his elbow: "What is it?"

The soldier saluted jerkily. "Unauthorized persons, Herr Schwinzog. We apprehended four of them about two hundred meters to the northwest. Two were armed."

"Hum!" grunted the big man explosively. His eyes narrowed, coming to rest on the group of captives. His scrutiny was chillily penetrating. He held it on them while the shadows of the helicopter vanes swept across his face a dozen times. Then he said flatly, in slightly accented English: "You, no doubt, are Americans?"

Manning was silent, feeling the dream-sense of unreality overcome him again. That question tangled time and space—it and another thing: around the left arm of Schwinzog's oddly cut coat was a broad band, and in a circle on it sprawled a stark black swastika. A hundred years ago—if a hundred years *had* passed—American armies had been trampling that emblem in mud and blood.

But Dr. Pankraz Kahl burst out, "*Wir sind keine Amerikaner! Wir—*" including himself and Wolfgang with a sweep of the arm, "*sind Deutsche!*"

Schwinzog regarded him expressionlessly. "And you?" he turned abruptly on Manning and Dugan.

"We're Americans," said Manning steadily, in English. Schwinzog's face did not change. But something in the look with which he had received Kahl's statement had jangled an alarm in Manning's brain. And he was still determined to keep his mouth shut and his ears open as much as possible.

Immediately he knew he had been right; for Schwinzog turned again to Kahl. "You say you are German. Your citizen's card, then."

The Herr Doktor started automatically to fumble at a pocket, then paused and made a wry face. "I—we have no such papers as you want. Naturally, since we —"

"Since you are spies?" Schwinzog folded his arms and the fingers of his right hand caressed his swastika brassard.

"That is ridiculous!" shouted Kahl. "I am trying to explain to you that we are visitors from your past! We come from a hundred years ago!"

For the first time Schwinzog looked interested. "And how do you explain your presence in the year 2051 *nach der Zeitwende?*"

The scientist was soothed. "I am Dr.

Pankraz Kahl, member of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft, inventor of the world's first *Zeitfahrer*."

"A time traveler? A machine of some sort?"

"Of course."

"Then where is this machine?"

"Back there in the forest—the forest! The fire! It may have reached it—" Kahl plucked at Schwinzog's coatsleeve. "You must save my invention—"

The other shook him off. "When I see it I will save it."

"Come, then! Quick!"

THE FIRE had rolled farther into the forest; everywhere the evergreens were burning like torches. Sparks rained down from overhead as they approached the time traveler's resting place, and directly ahead the thicket was a sheet of flame. From Kahl came a wounded cry; he broke from the guards and dashed forward. Then he stopped as if he had run into a stone wall.

The soldiers closed up, weapons thrusting.

"But this is the place!" Kahl was muttering feverishly. "It was right there—" He pointed at the bare, smoldering grass.

The ten-foot metal cube of the time traveler had burned to feathery ash and drifted away on the breeze—or it had in some no less unbelievable fashion vanished utterly.

Schwinzog's smile was not good to see. "Of course there is nothing there," he nodded satisfiedly. "Lieutenant Kramer, arrest these men. They are American saboteurs, and will be tried as such tomorrow by the *Volksgericht*."

"We," Eddie Dugan summed up the situation, "are up the creek without a paddle."

"And we don't know where the creek is," added Manning. "Only that this is 2051, and the Nazis evidently either won the war or staged a comeback somehow after losing. Neither idea seems possible, but here we are. Item, America is still fighting Nazism—at least, there are 'American saboteurs.' Item two, we landed smack in the middle of a wasp nest stirred up by those same saboteurs. They must have

scored a success; did you see that building in the woods beyond that field?"

"What building?"

"I noticed it just as they were loading us into their armored paddy wagon. It had been a big place—already fallen in; the fire must have started there. And the boys that started it must have been the ones that German captain was talking about—the ones that wore Caps of Darkness and flew off in an invisible helicopter."

"I'm getting a headache," groaned Dugan.

"I'd like to meet them," said Manning thoughtfully.

They could not see each other, but they could talk between the adjoining cells. Kahl was in the cell on the other side of Manning's; he had raved most of the night at the guards and the equally responsive steel walls. The two Americans had slept long and refreshingly; they had long since learned to sleep under any and all conditions. There were no windows to show daylight, but they must have been there most of twenty-four hours.

They hadn't seen much of the world of the future, thought Manning ruefully; only the glimpse of a street filled with shiny silent automobiles and oddly garbed pedestrians, as they had been hustled from a rolling dungeon to a stationary one. But if the town was Freiburg, it had changed a lot since they had last seen it—a skeletonous waste of ruin, with nothing left standing that the American bombers had wanted to flatten.

"We shouldn't of let that go. Kahl talk so much," resumed Dugan gloomily.

"How could we stop him? Anyway, I have a feeling he talked himself in even deeper than he did us."

Their discussion was ended by a clatter of boots, the arrival of a bristling escort. They were being honored with treatment as danerous and important prisoners—a distinction less flattering than ominous.

THE "People's Court" before which they were being taken was obviously not the extralegal supreme court which Hitler had made into a bogey-man for scaring grown-up consciences to sleep; this was

a local affair, in the same building that housed the jail. All four prisoners were herded into a rather small chamber, innocent of audience or jury. Opposite the entrance, beneath a huge hooked-cross banner, three men in black robes sat behind a desk. Two of them were old men who regarded the defendants with dull, incurious eyes; between them, his bulk dominating and shriveling them, sat Herr Schwinzog.

Into the deathly silence a hoarse voice cried, "*Heil Hitler!*"

It was Wolfgang, his conditioned reflexes spurred by sight of the swastika flag. The Americans stared at him; it was the first words they had heard him speak—perhaps they were the only ones he knew. Herr Schwinzog raised his eyebrows.

"What did you say?"

"*Heil Hitler!*" repeated Wolfgang mechanically.

"What does 'Hitler' mean?" asked one of the old men curiously.

"I don't know," said the other old man. "Perhaps he is feigning insanity."

Kahl found his voice. "But this is monstrous nonsense!" he shrilled. "Is this not the *tausendjahrige Reich* that Hitler promised us—"

"Silence!" snapped Schwinzog, and the scientist quailed. "You are not here to plead or talk gibberish, but to hear sentence. Your case has been decided after thorough investigation." He fixed all the prisoners with a frigid gaze. "You Americans are capable of more cunning than most Germans give you credit for; I know that well, for I was a colonial administrator in your country for ten years. Your attempt to masquerade as 'time travelers' shows originality in the conception and thoroughness in the execution. Needless to say, nothing directly incriminating was found among your effects. The experts report that even the metal identification tags found on the two who call themselves Ray Manning and Edward Dugan are authentic reproductions of those used by the American army at the time of the Conquest.

"However, you made the mistake of using too much imagination in the effort to

confuse. Your story is too preposterous to be taken seriously, especially since our best scientists have declared time travel impracticable. Accordingly, we could sentence you to death for unauthorized presence inside the Reich and for evident complicity in the attempted sabotage of a German experimental station.

"In view of the absence of direct evidence of subversive actions, we have decided on leniency. The two prisoners, real names unknown, alias Pankraz Kahl and Wolfgang Muller—your claim to German citizenship has been checked with the central archive in Berlin and found to be false. Therefore I sentence you for the crime of imposture to five years in a concentration camp."

Kahl burst into a desperate, unheard babble of protest. At a wave of Schwinzog's hand the guards closed in. The Herr Doktor was dragged away bodily, shouting disjointedly about the blindness of the Philistines and Hitler's thousand years.

"As for you two," Schwinzog eyed Manning and Dugan with an oddly speculative air, "since you have admitted American nationality, your punishment is limited to immediate deportation—back to America."

They were more staggered than they would have been if he had said they would be executed for failure to wear monocles.

As the guards surrounded them, Schwinzog raised his hand, his face adorned by a mocking grin. "One more thing. You will be interested to know that the raid on the Black Forest experimental station missed its objective; the building destroyed was an unimportant storehouse. The actual refining plant is nowhere in the vicinity. The project of which your organization seems to be so well informed goes on as before and will be completed inside a week. You may carry the message to America: *One week to live.*"

III

THEY HAD LITTLE opportunity, during the airplane flight to Hamburg, to exchange impressions or theories; they were constantly under the eyes of

two nondescript, expressionless men who sat unblinking, with hands in the pockets of their civilian jackets.

Nor was it better after that; at Hamburg their watchdogs delivered them to another pair apparently shelled from the same pod. One of the first set passed the word laconically: "Two American spies. To be released in Neubebersdorf, by order of Gestapoleiter Schwinzog." And the new guards saw Manning and Dugan aboard a great transatlantic rocket.

It was from the rocket over Hamburg that they got their first real look at a twenty-first century metropolis. Only from twenty miles high could it be appreciated—the immense sweep of city in which straight-line highways connected innumerable village-like centers interspersed among the soft green of parks and woodlands, covering the broad plain of the Elbe mouth and sprawling away to the eastward to join with Lubeck across the base of the Danish peninsula. While they watched it, spellbound, in the mirror-ports, the fairy city sank away and vanished in the mist and shadow of evening; and the rocket ascended steadily and almost soundlessly into thinning layers of stratosphere, and the sun rose up in the west before it.

Manning fell covertly to studying the Germans who filled the seats of the pressure-cabin. Most of them were civilians; they had the subdued worried faces of suburban commuters on a train, and they looked quite oblivious to the wonder of their age, even to the miracle of the machine that was hurling them so swiftly and surely across the ocean. They didn't look like a *Herrenvolk*. Here and there were the color and brass gleam of uniforms, and with them went a tawdry arrogance, an overconscious effort to dominate and impress directed at the gray civilians and most of all, Manning observed, at the half-dozen nondescript women in the compartment.

Had these people conquered the world and planted themselves atop it?

And if so, what had they done with the rest of it? With America, for example—a German colony, Schwinzog had indicated . . . Defeated, enslaved . . .

Then Manning remembered that he had seen with his own eyes evidence that America had not been wholly defeated, even after a hundred years; that someone, somehow, was still fighting on. His heart leaped up.

He addressed one of the guards for the first time: "Where are we bound?"

"Neubebersdorf," said the man curtly. He glanced at his watch, and in lieu of further explanation, leaned forward and twirled a knob beneath the port beside them; the scene mirrored in it shifted and swung to straight ahead, and they could see the coast line that had appeared in the west and was sweeping rapidly nearer. There was a great island and a sound, and at the latter's narrowest point was concentrated a smudge of city, almost as vast as the Hamburg of this time, but dark and jumbled beneath the afternoon sun, lacking the German seaport's ordered spaciousness.

"Hey!" exclaimed Dugan. "That's New York!"

The Gestapoman looked at him in silent contempt.

"It is—or was," amended Manning sorrowfully. As the rocket plunged closer, they see that much of the city was in ruin. The downtown district, in particular, showed an unrelieved prospect of devastation, empty windows in walls standing or fallen, and fields of shattered blocks and debris, testifying to a tremendous destruction and an even greater neglect. Something had toppled the towers that had stood there, and no one had come to clear away their wreck.

MANNING turned from the window. Later on he would be curious to learn more of what German rule had meant to America—for the moment a sick feeling in his stomach told him he had seen enough.

On Long Island, however, where the ship landed, the desolation of New York was not in evidence; where Brooklyn had been was a German settlement, and there were fair dwellings, broad green lawns and trees, and smooth-paved streets along which shining traffic moved with the whisper of electric motors.

They saw this last outpost of the master race briefly as they were whisked through in a chauffeured car that had met the rocket; their destination lay across the river, where eroded heaps caricatured the skyline of Manhattan. Guards with machine guns passed them onto a narrow span that had replaced the vanished Triborough Bridge; and inside five minutes the car halted on the American shore. It stood with motor running, and one of the Gestapomen ordered, "Get out."

Manning and Dugan got out, feeling numb in mind and body, and looked at the waterfront. From the air nothing had been visible except the colossal ruin of the world's once greatest city; but from close by could be seen that which was far worse—the dwellings of its present inhabitants, sprung up among its rubble like the grass through the cracks of its pavements. The houses were less than peasant huts, built of stone and concrete fragments and rotting lumber, sometimes against the still-standing wall of a shattered building.

Some distance away a small crowd had collected and stood dumbly watching the activity about the gleaming vehicle that had come over the guarded bridge. Others peered from the doorways of the nearer huts. All were ragged and soiled and in their faces was the dull resignation of a beaten inferiority.

Those were the American natives of Neuebersdorf, which had been New York, U.S.A.—*magni nominis umbra* . . . Manning wondered, with a surge of horror and pity, what made them grub here to construct their dens on the edge of the desolate city, whence they could look across the water and see the abodes of German pride and power and luxury—was it merely envy, or the need to nourish an undying hatred? The blankness of the watching faces gave no answer.

The car door slammed. The machine swung about and purred swiftly away up the bridge approach.

Dugan stared after it and said softly, "What the hell!" And when Manning failed to answer: "Well, Ray, what now?"

The other passed a hand across his forehead. "I don't know. But maybe we'd better start looking for invisible men."

"Fine," said Dugan. "When I see one, I'll yell."

Manning glanced toward the ragged crowd that had watched their arrival; it was already beginning silently to disperse, losing interest. Most of the two soldiers' clothing had been given back to them, but minus such items as leggings and steel helmets their 1945 combat dress looked sufficiently unmilitary and nondescript.

"No use just standing here," said Manning. They started to walk, turning at random into a narrow street that crooked among the ruins. Then Manning began to talk in a lowered voice. "If I'm not badly off, we're going to be followed and watched. Obviously the Germans have taken us for somebody else, and they didn't ship us across like ambassadors out of the kindness of their hearts. They think we belong to an American underground, and what we do now—they figure—is lead them to it. I wouldn't be surprised if—Uh huh." He pulled a hand out of the pocket of his field jacket with a small bundle of paper—money. It was marks, stamped *Ausland*. "They even slipped us a stake to make sure we didn't have any trouble in getting to underground headquarters—with the goon squad on our heels."

"Well, at least we can eat. And I guess we can wander around, looking as ignorant as we are, and lead them a wild goose chase . . . That sounds like a hell of a life," Dugan appendixed glumly to his own description.

"You and me both. Sooner or later we've got to get in touch with whoever's still carrying on the war. Because the war's still going on, in spite of—this." He didn't gesture, and Dugan knew he meant more than the broken buildings around them—the broken look they had both seen in the eyes of the people.

"Sure we've got to," said Dugan fiercely. "But how?"

MANNING shrugged. Their footsteps echoed, died away, echoed again in the deserted street, which here, in what must be the heart of the destruction, was hardly more than a tunnel between leaning walls where tons of masonry still hung in the twisted steel frames. From

behind them the trick echoes brought briefly the sound of other footsteps. They were being followed, all right.

"If the Gestapo just knew it," muttered Dugan, "they'd come nearer what they're looking for if that guy was leading us."

Manning nodded somberly; then he drew sharp breath and looked at his companion with kindling eyes. "Maybe that's the answer to our problem, Eddie."

"What answer?"

"Just an idea—maybe there's nothing in it. But if I'm right, we'll meet the underground—and soon!"

"Okay," said Dugan. "Anything you say. But what do we do?"

"I think we can concentrate on digging up something to eat," said Manning judiciously. "The sun's still up here, but it's been all of eight hours since we had dinner."

They emerged at last, tired and hungry, from the labyrinth of total devastation into a more populous district—a squalid village sprung up amid the ruin of New York. Along the edges of its dusty main street, where no lights were lit against the descending dusk, stood or squatted the people, talking listlessly in low voices or merely staring at the passers-by. Before one of the larger groups Manning halted.

"There's a joint down the street says 'Eat,'" Dugan nudged him.

"Wait." Manning faced the bunch of idlers and raised his voice. "Were any of you folks ever in Germany? It's a wonderful place. We just got back from there. They have beautiful cities with paved streets, millions of automobiles and helicopters and airplanes, with broadcast power to run them—"

"What are you giving us?" demanded a deep voice, its owner a blur in the twilight. "We know all that. And who the hell are you, anyway?"

"I know," insisted Manning. "I was in Germany only this morning."

A little, wrinkled man scurried out of a doorway and laid a protesting hand on Manning's arm. "You'd better shut up," he said sharply. "That's inflammatory talk, and it can get you in bad trouble."

"He's crazy," suggested another voice.

"I'm crazy," agreed Manning affably, and turned to go. Out of the tail of his eye he saw the little man go back inside, and he felt unreasonably optimistic.

"Now we can see about that chow," he told Dugan.

IV

THE INSIDE OF THE "EAT" WAS not attractive, nor was the food the slovenly waiter brought them. Dugan ate fervently. It didn't matter to him that America was no longer America, or that American coffee was no longer coffee.

But Manning dawdled. He had sat down with his back to the wall, so that his eyes could rove freely over the whole cramped interior; and he was all taut expectation. He was waiting for a sign.

Within ten minutes after their entry, three men had come in and sat down, two of them together. They might have been ordinary customers, but to Manning's covertly searching gaze they did not look sufficiently undernourished to be twenty-first century Americans. They looked like Germans.

The next arrivals were a youthful couple, and then for a while no one came in. Manning ordered another cup of "coffee." Then he got a shock.

For when he looked down, reaching for his cup, it was gone. He blinked, and it was there, solid, chipped and stained. He glanced briefly up at the unnoticed Dugan, then back to the cup—and there was no cup. And then there was, and he sat and squinted at it, struggling with a glimmer of understanding that this was what he had been waiting for.

Their table was for four. Out of the corner of his eye Manning thought he saw somebody sitting in the chair at his right. He turned his head quickly, and there was no one. The chair was empty. Too empty. His brain tried to crystalize that intuitive conviction, but failed.

He glanced sidelong at the suspiciously well-fed men. They sat morosely over glasses of what looked like beer, and paid no attention. But Manning knew that there was an invisible man in the room.

He sat hesitating over his next move,

when a voice screamed in his ear. It was a tiny thread of voice, not a whisper; it sounded like someone shouting frenetically over a bad telephone connection.

"Don't move," it commanded urgently. "I see you know I'm here beside you, and that you're being followed. Are you willing to follow instructions? If so, lay your right hand on the table."

Manning did so. The gnat-like voice shrilled, "All right. You leave here, turning left. Follow your nose and don't look back. About five minutes' walk will bring you to a bridge. Further instructions then. Act natural!"

Despite the final injunction, Manning hardly knew how they got out onto the street. Out of possible earshot of their shadows, he explained hurriedly to Dugan. "I thought they'd try to contact us. We have the Gestapo itself to thank for that, I'll bet. Even if it can't put the finger on the underground, it must know enough about them so that we were dumped off here for bait, it could let the word go out so that the underground would hear about us and grab at the bait right away. They didn't lose any agents on that raid in Germany, so they must have been pretty curious to learn that a couple of their men had been picked up on the scene and sent to New York! Now things are going to break."

The bridge loomed out of the darkness ahead. It was a wooden structure, crossing a narrow creek. Midway of the echoing span, they paused, and Manning pricked up his ears. He was not disappointed. The invisible presence said, "Good. I trust you can both swim? All right—drop over the railing, and swim straight back to the shore you just left, only come out under the bridge. I'll meet you there. Good luck!"

They looked at each other. "I heard him," Dugan said, and without more words placed a hand on the rickety railing and vaulted out over the black water. Manning gave him a few seconds to get clear, and followed. He came up clinging to his orientation, and struck out; when he splashed ashore, Dugan was already shaking himself on the narrow strip of sand below the bank.

AND a third man emerged abruptly from the shadow of the bridge piles. He was an ordinary-looking man in a worn leather jacket and patched trousers, but his face was masked by a dark hood, blank save for eye-slits, and on his back he carried something like a small pack with two small levers protruding. In his right hand was a pistol, and in his left a bundle; he dropped the latter on the ground and stepped back.

"Put those on," he hissed. "Quick, before they get here!"

The bundle was two outfits such as the stranger wore. They donned them as instructed; the hoods were stiff with wire, and connected by a flexible cord to the packs. Manning eyed the gun speculatively; the masked man explained softly, "It's not that I don't trust you, but those gadgets are too valuable to take any chances with. They're invisibility units. Start them by pressing here." He pulled down one of the levers on his pack; he seemed to blur slightly, but they could still see him. "The headgear insulates you pretty well from the effect. Go on, start those units!" Heavy feet were thundering overhead on the bridge planks.

They obeyed; the packs made a faint hum. The stranger relaxed visibly. "Now we're okay," he said in a normal voice. "By the time they catch on, we'll be a long way from here."

Directly above, an angry snarl: "*Sie sind grade ins Wasser gesprungen! Wer hatte erwartet—*"

Somebody else answered, "*Vielleicht wird ein Boot dort unten gelegen haben.*"

"Good guessing," approved the masked man cheerfully. He motioned Manning and Dugan toward where a small skiff lay beached between the piles. "Help me launch this. First, though, turn your units up to full power—like this—so they'll cover the boat."

Manning was startled at the man's bravado; as all three laid hold of the boat, he whispered anxiously, "Won't they hear —?"

"Not if we shouted our heads off," the other answered. "With these units going, we're not only invisible, but inaudible and practically intangible. I've walked through

a cordon that was closing in on me with linked arms." He sprang nimbly into the bow of the boat. "Grab an oar, you two, and make yourselves useful. I've been through a lot of trouble on your account." He seemed to decide that introductions were finally in order. "My name's Jerry Kane. At any rate, it's my favorite alias."

Manning and Dugan named themselves and fell to rowing. "Downstream," said Kane, and he gazed back at the bridge with interest as they pulled away. Manning glanced back over his shoulder; there were dark figures swarming on the bridge, and lights, and a car had stopped there; even as he looked a searchlight beam swayed out across the water, moving systematically back and forth. For a moment it fell full upon the rowboat, and Manning ducked involuntarily; but the light passed on and there was no outcry, no shots came.

Manning said hoarsely, "That light was on us! It didn't go through us, or anything of the sort. A body that reflects light is visible. So how the devil——"

"We're not optically invisible," answered Kane amusedly. "So far as I know, that's a physical impossibility. Actually, those Germans saw us, but they didn't notice us. Ever catch yourself looking right at something and not seeing it, because it was too familiar or because you were thinking about something else? That's the effect the field has. Anything in the middle of it hides behind a psychic block in the mind of whoever looks at it. That's why it works on hearing, too, and even on touch. It's not perfect; if you set off a magnesium flare in front of somebody, or punched him in the nose, he'd notice something was up—but hardly before. When you get acquainted with the effect it makes you feel like a ghost. Back in that cafe, I had to shout in your ear till I deafened myself before I could make you hear."

THEY glided down the current, and the lights and voices around the bridge receded rapidly. As Manning bent to his oar, his imagination was busy with the first item of twenty-first century technology which went completely beyond his twentieth-century knowledge. In Germany he had seen the evidences of a

mighty and advanced civilization, but everything had been the logical perfection of inventions already known . . .

Kane seemed to read his thoughts. "Working like we do, we can't compete with the Germans in things that call for a lot of resources and equipment. They have all the big weapons—the rockets and tanks and atomic bombs. For anything to be useful to us, it has to be something that can be invented and built in a cellar. So we've had to open up brand-new lines of development—and in fields like psychoelectronics we're miles ahead of the Germans, because they didn't have to . . . Better pull over. We don't want to get rammed," he interrupted himself.

A blinding eye was bearing down on them across the water. In its stark glare Manning felt nakedly visible again. But they veered sharply toward the bank, and the launch went past in a swish of foam, still scanning river and shore ahead.

"Where we going?" Dugan asked practically.

"We're about there," answered Kane. "Easy now." He pointed to where a jumble of ruins projected like a pier into the stream, the ripples lapping and gurgling in the spaces between the great piled fragments. "In there—the only space big enough for the boat. Better duck." Their craft slid with scant clearance into an opening like the mouth of a cave. Kane produced a flashlight, and they saw that a timbered tunnel ran back into the bank at right angles to the entrance.

"Up to the end," ordered Kane. They poled with oar-thrusts against the tunnel sides for a score of yards, until the boat bumped against a wooden platform at the end of the shaft. Kane sprang ashore and made fast, and the others followed. The flashlight beam searched out a trapdoor; below it were stairs that led downward. At the bottom they trod on cement, and there was another door, on which Kane knocked in a deliberate pattern.

Presently a bolt was shot back, and the door swung open. The man who opened it was hooded and it was a little hard to keep him in sight, even for those likewise protected. When he saw Kane, however, he switched off his invisibility unit. The

new arrivals did likewise, and all of them slipped off their stifling hoods with relief.

Jerry Kane had a surprisingly youthful and unlined face, topped with curly blond hair which women must have loved to run their fingers through. He didn't look much like an underground plotter. The man who had opened the door fitted the role better; he was gaunt, blue-jawed and dour.

The room they had entered had begun life as a basement; it was big, concrete-walled, ill-lit by an electric bulb dangling from the low ceiling, its furnishings a long table and a number of chairs which indicated its use as a gathering-place for a good many people. The only other person in it now was a massive man who sat at the table, an open book spread out before him, and stared unblinkingly at those who had come in.

"Most of our regular agents are out—looking for you," Kane remarked. He waved them to seats, and sat down himself on the table's end. "However, we have here Harry Clark"—the blue-jawed man—"and Igor Vzryvov, one of the Russian members."

Clark nodded noncommittally. The big Russian rumbled in faintly accented English: "Pleased to meet you. I have never met any time travelers before."

They stared at him. Manning turned on Kane: "You know about us?"

Kane grinned. "You told the Germans you came out of the past. At least, that's what was reported in the camera session of the court which passed on your case this morning. One of our friends happened to be there—and at your trial, later on."

"Was there an invisible man *there*?"

"No, he was visible and you saw him. Remember two elderly jurists who served as a sounding board for Gestapoleiter Schwinzog?. One of them is a friend of ours. We have a good many, even inside Germany."

"He calls them friends," growled Igor Vzryvov. "I say no German can be a friend."

"So——" Manning was numbed by surprise. "So you've had your eye on us from the start."

"Just about."

"And you believe our story?"

"Since the Germans didn't, I'm inclined to," admitted Kane. "We know that more things are possible than German imagination can swallow; we've got several such things here. Of course, it's always just possible that you're German spies, using a crazy wheels-within-wheels stunt to get on the inside. I don't think so, though, and fortunately I don't have to guess." He turned to Vzryvov. "Got the apparatus set up?"

"Since an hour ago," said the Russian.

Kane slid off the table top. He became brusque. "If you'll just step into the next room, we'll read your minds and settle all doubts."

FIFTEEN MINUTES later, Igor Vzryvov switched off the psychoanalyzer. Manning glanced up under the spidery hemisphere of wire that gathered the faint broadcasts of the brain, and met Kane's warm smile. The underground leader tossed aside the graphs he had been studying, and extended a welcoming hand.

"You're genuine, all right. No need to examine your friend—your mind says he came with you out of the past, and that's enough and to spare."

"Swell!" said Dugan. "I didn't much like the idea of having that thing poking around inside my head."

Kane caressed the machine affectionately. "This is one of the best achievements of cellar science. Thanks to it, we've got the only leak-proof organization this sinful world has ever seen. The Nazi party is one of the tightest setups ever created without benefit of the psychoanalyzer, and we've got men inside it—but we *know* that all our members are loyal and stable." His expression darkened. "Of course, if this and our other psychoelectronic developments got into German hands, we'd be sunk. With their resources, they could exploit the field a lot more thoroughly than we can. For example, Igor here has invented a death ray that kills by just convincing a man he's dead—but to make it an effective weapon would take a lot more power. We get a good deal of leakage here from the Long Island station, but we have to be careful about antennas."

The four of them sat around the table in the outer room. Harry Clark had disappeared—literally, and then gone out to pass the word to the agents scattered around New York that the men they sought had been found.

"Now," said Kane, "since you're really time travelers, I'm on fire to hear how you did it. A time machine might be a useful addition to our arsenal, though it sounds like a tricky thing to use . . ."

"I'm afraid we can't help on that score," said Manning, and related the whole story of their experience with Herr Doktor Kahl's *Zeitfahrer*.

Kane rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "So you're stranded in our time. I feel for you! At least the Germans didn't get the machine, either—though they have got the inventor. We may have to do something about that. And what about you? Have any plans?"

Manning met his eyes squarely. "A hundred years ago, we were fighting a war. It seems we lost it—how or why, I don't know. I don't think we lost it in the fighting, but probably before it ever began, when we were complacent and let the Germans get a head start in preparation and invention. Anyway, for us that's still unfinished business."

"And we'd like the chance to finish it!" stated Dugan bluntly.

Kane smiled with a touch of sadness. Vzryvov said explosively, "The end may be soon!" and his eyes burned.

In Manning's memory flashed the vision of a mocking face. He asked abruptly: "What did Schwinzog mean: 'A message for America—one week to live'?"

The shadow on Kane's face deepened, but he did not show surprise. "I guess he meant just that. That the Germans are about ready to do to America what they did to Russia fifty years ago . . . But of course you don't know anything about the history of the last century. If you want to catch up on the missing chapters, I've got a fair-sized collection of books on the subject. All the ones dealing with events since the War of the Conquest are German, of course—English has just about stopped being a written language—and you'll probably find they don't even agree

on what you know. You said, didn't you, that you were with an American army advancing into Germany?"

"That's right—and it was only one of several."

Kane grinned wryly. "The books don't even whisper that Germany was ever invaded in that war. They must have been a lot closer to defeat than they've ever admitted since. But—" he shrugged, "they won in the end, so what's the difference?"

"How could they win?" scowled Dugan. "Hell, we had them on the run!"

KANE gave him a pitying look. "You must have left some time before the Germans suddenly rose from the ashes and struck back at us. They attacked us with a new weapon—a radioactive dust, by-product of several big piles—atomic power plants—they had secretly got going by 1949. The occupation forces were wiped out—along with a million or so of their own people. In no time Western Europe was overrun again. The whole of Soviet Russia seems to have collapsed about the same time." He looked down at his hands, clasped on the table in front of him; his voice went on with the dispassionate recital of the dead past. "There was an attempt to defend England that folded up when London was dusted off the map. I haven't been able to find much information on the war in Asia, but I think they had a long tough fight putting down guerrilla resistance in Siberia and later on in China.

"Then came the attack on America, and for that they used the dust in combination with another ace in the hole—their own atomic bombs. The first one was dropped right here, on New York. It flattened five or six square miles and killed about half a million people. The defenses that we'd devised against the dust—inadequate as they must have been, because there isn't any real defense—were neutralized by the bomb. America fought for just one month, and after that there wasn't any United States—just a disorganized mob of survivors, dazed by the cities' destruction and the sterilization of big stretches of countryside.

"Germany proclaimed the New Order over the face of the whole Earth—humanity to submit to the leadership of the Ger-

man Volk, its highest evolutionary type. Everywhere the nations surrendered without a fight.

"Since the Conquest there's been only one serious, organized rebellion in this country; that was in the year two thousand, fifty-one years ago. The Germans put it down with bombs and poison; a lot of innocent people were killed, and for a long time after that it was impossible to organize any resistance. Since our movement got started twenty years ago, we've been damn careful not to goad the Germans into making a wholesale slaughter. "Now——" His face twisted in pain

"They've decided to anyway?" asked Manning with studied calm.

"As a matter of policy, not revenge. You see, for a while after the Conquest they had a lot of use for slave labor, so the subject peoples were valuable to them; but now that they have plenty of atomic power, running nearly automatic factories and mechanized farms to supply all their needs and luxuries, the rest of the Earth's population looks to them like so much excess baggage. All they have use for is land, *Lebensraum* for their own growing people. They've calculated that the whole Earth could be covered by Germans by 2500 A. D. As far as they're concerned the rest of us can rot or starve—and we do; but we don't die out! So—they murdered Russia fifty years ago—that was what touched off the rising here—and we're next!"

Manning said unbelievably, "What do you mean—'murdered'?"

"The technical term is 'genocide.' They did it with guns and gas and, when necessary, the atomic dust. It's quite a job to wipe out a whole nation, and the Germans bungled Russia pretty badly and met a lot of stiffer resistance than they expected, and a lot of people—such as Igor's parents—got away to other countries. But since then they've made improvements in the method.

"Sometime soon, in a few days, maybe—a rocket will take off for somewhere in Germany and proceed to a point in space about fifty thousand miles from the Earth. There it will discharge fifteen hundred metric tons of radioactive dust—a new mixture of ingredients having a few days' half

life, for initial devastating effect, and of others with a period of about a year—to take care of anybody that tries to sit it out underground. The dust will drift toward Earth in an expanding cloud, whose size and shape they've calculated down to the last decimal, and which, when it falls on Earth's surface, will cover an area a little larger than the United States. It will be spread thin by then—about one gram to the acre—but that will be enough."

MANNING sat silent. The idea of these new ways of all-compassing destruction was too much for a mind that had learned to regard high explosives, machine guns and flame throwers as adequately murderous. And the plan for exterminating a nation was too monstrous to think about, unless in the same light as it must be seen by the minds that conceived it—as something like dusting a field of grain to kill off insects whose only crime is that they eat what men want to eat.

"And you've known about this, and haven't stopped it?" he asked at last.

"They've been busy making and refining the dust for a year now, and we've known about it almost that long. And we've tried to stop them.

"We've tried to assassinate the men responsible for the plan. But the ruling clique, like your acquaintance, Schwinzog, aren't under any illusions and they aren't going to yield any power. We've tried to get them and mostly failed.

"Finally, one of our men got inside the Reichministerium fur Raumschiffahrt and learned that the space ship *Siegfried* had been assigned for conversion to the uses of the project. The raid you stumbled into was trying to locate and destroy it, but they didn't find it and blew up a building instead. That's our last chance even to gain time—if we can't wreck the dust ship, I don't know what we can do."

Igor Vzryvov broke his brooding silence. "You will do as we did," he proclaimed with flat conviction. "Save what you can of your organization by flight to other lands, whence you will carry on the fight—to the death, without the crippling reservations imposed by millions of hostages."

Kane looked at him with smoldering

eyes. "What would be left to fight for?"

"Wait and see," insisted the Russian implacably. "You will really begin to fight when there is no more America to be saved, only Germany to be destroyed."

Manning put in hastily, "Your men didn't locate the—space ship. How do you know it's even in the Black Forest?"

Kane frowned, then shrugged. "We don't. But there's nowhere else it can be. We've checked every spaceport in the Reich."

"Maybe it's outside Germany."

"There aren't any ports in the subject countries. And if one had been built, and the *Siegfried* landed there—well, it simply couldn't have been done inconspicuously. We have psychoelectronic communicators scattered over the whole world, and what's more important, the best grapevine connections. We'd have heard."

"What about the polar regions? Antarctica?"

"I guess it would be technically possible—though enormously difficult and expensive—to build a spaceport there. But it just isn't reasonable. They aren't that scared of our interference."

Manning bit his lip. "One little thing," he murmured, half to himself, "makes me think that ship isn't in the Schwarzwald at all. Herr Schwinzog gloated that your raid missed the refining plant; he must have forgotten for a moment that you're supposed to believe the space ship is there too . . ." Abruptly he raised his head. "Listen—maybe there's one part of Germany you didn't investigate."

"What do you mean?"

"Where Eddie and I were just this afternoon. Long Island."

KANE and Vzryvov looked at him with wild surmise. "You might be right," Kane said jerkily. "There's a field there that would do. But a space ship landing would have been seen for hundreds of miles——" His eyes widened with a sudden idea. "They needn't have landed it there, though. They could have brought it down in the ocean, and towed it in!"

"Sure," said Manning, though he hadn't thought of that. "An amphibious operation. The island's well-guarded?"

"Suspiciously so, now that you mention it. We don't have a single agent there—we've been concentrating on the expeditionary force in Europe, of course, and we've supposed the additional Long Island defenses were merely installed in fear of an attack on the German colony, when the people hear—— But that could be it! They could have hidden the ship under our noses!"

He sprang to his feet; he wore a look almost of gaiety, but his eyes held feverish lights. "If we could only start after it tonight! But this things calls for preparation. They'll be ready for anything, invisibility units included . . . But we've got to try tomorrow night. If the ship is there—it may not be much longer."

Manning and Dugan exchanged glances. Manning said pointblank: "Are we in on this deal? We were soldiers in our own time, and—Americans . . ."

Reading Kane's face, he realized he hadn't needed to ask.

V

THE BOAT SLIPPED silently, impelled by muffled oars, toward the shore that lay dark and seemingly lifeless a furlong away. The underground in New York had a couple of motor launches—but there might be sound detectors on that shore, which would not be fooled by the powerful invisibility unit that purred quietly, clamped to a thwart amidships. So they rowed.

The boat was laden with men, weapons, and explosives. The men were monstrous-headed shapes, for they wore gas masks under the featureless hoods; but the poised alertness of Kane's figure, upright in the bow as he scanned the black shore and called soft directions to Vzryvov at the steering oar, expressed all their eager anxiety on the threshold of decision. Manning and Dugan sat side by side; in front of the former was lanky Clark, and beside him a chemist named Larrabie, who clasped between his knees a box full of bombs of his own making—canisters of a versatile compound which with a detonator had the violence of TNT, without one was an excellent substitute for thermite.

Manning had to remember that he had once taken part in another landing on a conquered shore—Normady in 1944, when the air had been full of planes and the sea of ships, and the invasion had rolled ashore like a resistless juggernaut . . . If those millions had failed, what could six men in a rowboat do?

The night before, in the room Kane had given them, Manning had lain long sleepless, and passed the time turning through Kane's books of history—titles like *Aufstieg Deutschlands zur Weltherrschaft, Eroberung der Erde, Das deutsche Jahrhundert.* One thing about the oddly twisted story they told had piqued his curiosity, and he had sought earnestly before he found mention—in a footnote—of the fact that one Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) had occupied the civic office of Reichskanzler (later abolished) at the time of the Conquest. But the leaders of that period, according to the histories, had been the generals and military men such as Rundstedt, Rommel, Keitel and Doenitz.

The future had obviously not gone according to anybody's plans made prior to 1949. A new factor had come in—the monstrous reality of atomic weapons, which had suddenly made it possible for a few men in one nation to hold the threat of death over all life on Earth. America had had them first and had used them to subdue Japan. But the German onslaught had been too swift; the combination of atomic dust and atomic bombs had paralyzed the U. S. A. before she could strike back.

"Up oars," whispered Kane. The boat glided forward the last few yards as the dripping oars rose over the water, then sand crunched under the keel.

Cautiously they sloshed ashore. Vzryvov knelt in the boat for half a minute, working with wires and one of Larrabee's compact bundles of death—booby-trapping the priceless invisibility unit against possible discovery.

Each man carried a slung automatic rifle, three bombs, and a long knife. An invisible man could kill with a knife in the midst of a crowd and walk away before anyone noticed.

They started moving without time wasted

in consultation or casting about. All had studied the available maps of the area until their eyes smarted; and the moon was up, which for them was a special advantage.

THIS stretch of shore was occupied by the sea-side villas of the German masters; it was a good hour's walk from the main colony and the rocket port. The Germans could hardly have protected the whole coastline with automatic alarms.

As they topped the seaward slope, though, from not far distant, where a house bulked in the shadow, exploded the barking of a watchdog. The raiders froze; Kane swore perfunctorily and said shortly, "Push on. Dogs can see us, or at least scent us. That one doesn't seem to have raised anybody yet—"

They pushed on, tramping across meadows and through woods, steering clear of the roads that might be watched by electric eyes—as the rocket port must be without doubt, if the dust ship was there.

Half a mile from the German colony, in sight of its lights and their glimmering reflection in the water of the East River, a high fence barred their way. It was plain wire, stretching to right and left out of sight—probably across the whole island.

"That wasn't on the map," said Dugan. "Of course not," responded Kane. "That's the first line of defense. Touch it, and you'd alert the whole place." He didn't look unhappy about it, judging by the flash of his grin in the moonlight. "Brother, I think we've come to the right address!"

Vzryvov remarked imperturbably, "The road must pass through it yonder." He gestured to where an occasional moving light picked out the highway.

"Right," said Kane. They set out along the fence, keeping at a respectful distance from the wire.

The highway entrance was floodlighted and visibly protected by movable arms like those used at grade crossings. These, together with the sleepy squad of German soldiers that stood guard beyond the fence, would not have given pause to the invisible men. But there had to be invisible defenses too.

They waited on the shoulder of the incoming traffic lane. Manning and Dugan could scarcely quell the jittery feeling of being exposed in plain view of the enemy, but the others were unconcerned.

"We've got to hitch a ride," explained Kane softly. "Just passing through behind a vehicle wouldn't be good enough, you can bet . . ."

A car came rushing out of the darkness and swooped to a stop with screaming tires. It was a gleaming pleasure machine, transparent plastic top flung back to let the night air cool the heated faces of three young couples that occupied it, evidently on their way to continue in town a party that had outgrown the facilities of the countryside.

"Get a good look at their admission procedure," said Kane.

The guards bestirred themselves; one operated the gate mechanism, the rest surrounded the car, grasping shining steel blades on long shafts, barbed like medieval halberds. They swung their archaic weapons around and over the car, hacking the air viciously. The girls in the car squealed and snuggled as the driver eased forward under an interlocked arch of steel.

Manning said, "They're watching for us, all right!"

Kane nodded, then tensed as another automobile rolled up and stopped. "This one's O. K." he said aloud. "Quick, now—get inside it!"

They went forward in a pellmell rush. Kane eased open a back door of the car—a sedan with a lone man at the wheel—and all six of them squeezed themselves into the back seat, pulling the door quietly to after them. They held their breath, but there was no cry of surprise or alarm. The soldiers went routinely but thoroughly through the ritual of halberds! any invisible man clinging to the outside of the vehicle would have had to drop off or be dragged into the wicked blades.

THE CAR rolled through the gate and picked up speed with the violent surge of an electric motor. The man hunched in the front seat drove with businesslike concentration, oblivious of his six unwanted passengers. The raiders grinned

at each other, shifted their cramped positions a little and waited.

Presently the town's lights began to swim past. Kane, in a position to see out the left-hand window, muttered: "We're passing the rocket field—they've thrown a brand-new wall around it. If this guy would just slow down—well, we've got to stop the car." He wriggled up until he could lean over the front seat—and stiffened. All of them heard, the moan of a siren closing up behind..

"*Donnerwetter!*" growled their chauffeur, and clamped on the brakes. A few feet behind loomed up a pair of headlights and a searchlight helped bathe the car ahead in a merciless illumination.

"Out!" said Kane sharply, flinging open the left-hand door.

They sprawled out and ran, stooping instinctively, through the patch of brilliance. Uniformed Germans were climbing out of the other vehicle and starting to form a cordon.

Dugan, the last man out, halted a moment to close the car door, then sprinted after the rest. They huddled against the forbidding wall that had been built around the rocket port. Larrabee, eyes on the brightlit scene, nervously hefted a bomb. Kane shook his head.

"Time enough to make big noises when we get inside," he advised. And to the wholeparty, "I spotted an entrance a couple of hundred yards back. Come on!"

They ran in single file under the frowning face of concrete. It might have been possible to form a human chain and get over the wall; but there was unquestionably alarms atop it, and ready guns.

Beyond the wall, a whistle began hooting. The field was being alerted.

Kane panted, "Don't know what tipped them off—but probably we were photographed at that gate."

The entrance to the field was solidly blocked by a massive iron grille. Beyond it, they could see men running and springing into position behind a concrete redoubt, through which a machine gun thrust menacingly, covering the opening in the wall.

"Damn!" said Kane. "No more time to be subtle. We'll have to knock that out."

Eddie Dugan was already unhitching

one of the home-made grenades from his belt. "Stand out of line with the gate," he said grimly, "and I'll get it for you." He gauged the distance and the weight of the bomb and threw with trained precision. The missile rose in a high arc like a mortar shell's, and hit the ground almost as Dugan did in his drive for cover. Fragments of shattered concrete and metal clanged against the grillework and whistled out into the street. A crash of glass and frightened screams came from the houses across the way; and down the street the patrol-car siren wailed suddenly into life again.

Kane sprang to his feet, verifying with a glance the emplacement's destruction, and hurled another bomb at the gateway. Its explosion was blinding, but a moment later they saw the way clear, the grille blown off its hinges and twisted like spaghetti. Simultaneously a rattle of shots, insignificant-sounding after the deafening blasts of high explosive, told that the patrol car, racing it motor up the street, had opened fire on the entrance.

Clark was down on one knee, finger closing on the trigger of his automatic. The oncoming car skidded and spun half around. Two men spilled out and fled for cover; Clark dropped one and missed the other.

THE big noises had begun, and speed was the big thing now. The raiders dashed headlong through the wrecked gateway.

"Get clear!" shouted Kane, and on the heels of his cry came the sputter of machine-gun fire, first from one side of the entrance and then from the other. Puffs of dust sprang out of the wall and ricochets whined plaintively. Other guard posts were covering the breach, but the German gunners must have hesitated before firing without a target, and they were seconds too late.

The Americans crouched, half-sheltered by the ruined emplacement. To the right from a cluster of buildings, the warning whistle shrieked hoarsely on, and they heard through the incessant gunfire the noises of excited voices. Ahead of them stretched the wide, seared waste of the

rocket field, its boundaries invisible in the darkness.

"We're in," breathed Kane, "and there's the ship!"

Out on the field, far from all structures, it towered upright, its blunt nose five hundred feet above the blackened earth. Even though no light shone on or from it, they could recognize its lines as those of the vessel whose stolen plans they had gone over point by point—*Siegfried*, the dust ship.

"They must have raised it to launching position only tonight," said Kane harshly. "Otherwise we could have seen it from across the river. So—it must be loaded and ready to go!"

A thousand feet of open and empty field separated them from the space ship. With straining eyes they could see tiny human figures scurrying about its base in the moonlight, forming a protective circle. Then floodlights went on all over the field and left not a shadow anywhere. The Germans knew, or feared, that the invisible attackers had slipped inside their citadel.

The rain of steel on the gateway had stopped; instead came dull thudding concussions, and a creeping haze obscured the entrance. Gas.

They had prepared for that. But now a more formidable threat made itself known; from near the buildings came a frenzied barking of dogs.

"We've got to get across the open," snapped Kane. "Better stick together and run for it. If we can get among that gang around the ship—neither dogs nor instruments can tell the difference between visible and invisible men!"

They rose from their cover and pelted grimly across the endless-seeming field. To the right, parties of men with dogs were fanning out, too slowly to intercept the raiders. But they were only halfway to the ship when the lights suddenly snapped off—for a moment they stumbled, blinded, in darkness, and the lights flashed daz- zlingly on again. A couple of seconds later the puzzling action was repeated—

And from the cordon about the ship, so near now, a voice screamed hysterically, "*Da lauft einer!*" On its heels came a

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thunder of shooting, and bullets snapped past the hurrying Americans.

They flung themselves flat on the scorched ground. The lights flashed again and again as if an insane hand were at the master switch. "What's happened?" gasped Manning. "Did they see us?"

"They've learned or guessed one of our weaknesses," said Kane in his ear. "When the whole field of vision is suddenly illuminated, the brain may register an invisible object, especially if it's moving, for a moment before it melts into the background." Something whimpered in the air and burst with an ear-splitting bang only a few yards away, showering the raiders with earth. "They've got our position. Get going—now!" as the lights flashed on.

Kane's fingers had been busy fusing a bomb, and as he rose erect he threw it straight into the cordon. The crash of the explosion was followed by shrieks and then, as the lights flashed on again, by a prolonged volley of shots.

Larrabee spung around in midstride and

rolled on the ground. The long-legged Clark flung out his arm and pitched forward. "Get the——" His voice choked off.

THE survivors charged at the gap where the bomb had wrought bloody havoc. The Germans were closing it from the sides. Manning caught a glimpse of sweating faces, staring eyes glazed with fear of an enemy they could not see; and he saw also the vast loom of the space ship above him. He fumbled woodenly with a detonator cartridge.

Kane's fingers bit into his arm. "Into the ship!" he rasped. "You'd never dent it." Nothing was between the invaders and the hull, where an open airlock, high overhead, showed as a black disc.

Manning glanced over his shoulder, and in the nightmarishly flashing illumination saw Larrabee's body sprawled in a frozen convulsion, and standing over it, head thrown back, a huge hound. A black mass of yelling men was closing in . . .

Then the four of them were clambering up the ladder that rose dizzily to the space ship's lock forty feet above ground. Every flash of the light silhouetted them so nakedly against the great hull that it seemed impossible they should not be seen and picked off as they clung helplessly. But Manning saw Dugan above him, disappear into the lock; he heaved himself up and stumbled into the saving blackness, followed by a panting bulk that must be Vzryvov.

Kane's voice came, surprisingly steady, from deeper in the tunnel-like lock, where as their eyes adjusted a faint glow was evident, seeping no doubt from a passage beyond. This was the main loading lock, and I guess still is. They've apparently torn out all the freight decks and replaced them with a lead-lined tank for the dust, bin and they've been loading it through a hatch just across the peripheral walk. But eth hatch is sealed now." He did not need to add what that meant. The *Siegfried* had its deadly cargo and was ready to take off.

"Then," said Vzryvov matter-of-factly, "let us blast open the tank and scatter it with our remaining bombs. That will make it impossible for the Germans to salvage the ship, or even use this field, until the dust had burned itself out in a year or so." When Kane did not answer, the Russian growled impatiently, "We *must* do it, and quickly. Our comrades' bodies are out there, and with them the secret of invisibility. We must make this area unapproachable!"

"Wait," said Kane with a curious tense urgency. Manning wondered fleetingly if the underground leader recoiled from the suicidal action which the other urged; then he realized that Kane was listening, and listened too.

The babble of voices from the ground outside had fallen to a mutter; and through it cut an incisive voice of authority.

"Es waren ihrer nur zwei!"

Another voice answered, "Ja, Herr Oberst—wenigstens haben wir nur einen oder zwei bei der Blützbeleuchtung gesehen—"

"Ihr habt gar nichts Verlässliches gesehen. Aber wieviel zeigen die Photos?"

"Zwei, Herr Oberst."

They could almost hear the commander's gusty sigh of relief. *"Nun, so haben wir sie vor uns liegen, und die Sache ist erledigt. Noch dazu werde ich ein schönes Geschenk nach Deutschland schicken können..."*

"You see," said Kane, "they think they've got us all. Evidently their cameras never caught more than two of us at once, and hooded we all looked alike. So we're reasonably safe."

"Safe!" stormed Vzryvov. He clambered awkwardly to his feet in the curved mouth of the lock. "If you have gone crazy or have got cold feet, I will go and blow up the dust compartment alone."

"Wait!" snapped Kane. "Listen, Igor. You don't seem to realize that luck—and the sacrifice of two of our best men—have given us a better chance than we ever hoped for. The *Siegfried* is just waiting for the crew to come aboard. If we lie low until the ship's in space—then take care of the crew and seize control—Well, the invisibility unit will be in German hands, sure. But what good will that do them if there isn't any Germany?"

THEY could hear each other's breathing in the airlock. Then Vzryvov said, "I see. Forgive my stupidity."

Manning asked carefully, "You mean to turn the dust against Germany? Wipe out the whole country?"

"Certainly. It'll be easy, once we take over the ship; a few degrees change in course—"

"Even your allies there?"

"Germans are Germans," growled Vzryvov. "At best, they are confused dreamers who think they could repay their debt to the world with a gesture."

Manning could not see Kane's face; but the other's voice held solemn earnestness. "We'll only be doing to them what they're trying to do to America . . . Oh, hell, that's no valid argument. But, Manning, you come from an age when there weren't any atomic weapons, and such things were unthinkable because they were impossible. You can't think as we do, who've lived all our lives with the knowledge of what is possible—of how little human life is worth.

"And you don't have a hundred years of

slavery behind you. We were as great a people as the Germans in your day, I think, but we've been trampled into the mud until we've not got much civilization or pride or decency left. And we won't have, for a long time, even if Germany is destroyed. But if it isn't we, and the other nations of the world, will never have those things again—the things that make human beings worth something.

"I sometimes wonder what would happen if history had taken a different turning—if we, instead of the Germans, had been the ones to discover atomic energy. Would we have been any better than they were? Or would we have used the power to make ourselves the masters of Earth and to monopolize civilization, just as Germany did?"

"You would have," snorted Vzryvov. "Russia would have. Any nationalism of that time, given such a power, would have behaved the same."

"I don't know," faltered Manning. "You may be right, but I can't imagine . . ."

"Anyway," Kane's tone grew bitter, "the Germans have made the world into what they wanted, and they've made us what we are. And now we're going to smash their world. Maybe something better will come out of its destruction. Maybe not. If not—revenge will have to be enough for us."

VI

THE CAPTAIN OF THE *Siegfried* squinted at the tables the navigator had handed him, mentally translating their figures into acceleration units. The ship was only an hour from the assigned point in space, and it was necessary to make a final, ultimately correct alignment, in which seconds of arc meant miles of displacement in the dispersion of the dust on Earth's surface.

The captain's concentration was disturbed by the nagging conviction that something was amiss—or had been amiss a minute or so earlier—about his familiar control room. For a moment he had fancied that the door to the sternward-descending stairshaft was standing open; but it was obviously closed . . .

He put the doubts angrily out of his mind, frowned at the papers, and ordered



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the expectant pilot: "*Fünf Minuten sech-sunddreissig Sekunden dritter Geschwindigkeit dem Backbordgetriebe!*"

They were not very inspired last words, but he had no chance to make additions, for in the next instant Kane's sharp knife sank between his ribs. The captain gurgled in an oddly muffled fashion and would have fallen, save that invisible hands caught and lowered him.

The navigator, looking straight at him, finally realized something had happened. He opened his mouth to cry out, but his throat was cut from ear to ear and no sound emerged.

The pilot, about to press the buttons that would wake the portside rocket bank, was stupefied to see that his hand hung over the controls and refused to move as if paralyzed. Enveloped in the mind-numbing field of an invisibility unit at full power, he did not feel the grip that held him or the knife-thrust that killed him.

The four Americans switched off their units and indulged in the luxury of removing the metal-stiffened hoods. They had no more to fear aboard the *Siegfried*; two other members of the crew had already been disposed of in the cabins below, and now even if all Germany had known of their presence aboard the dust ship—no method had ever been devised for attacking a ship in space.

But they did not exchange many words. There was work that desperately had to be done as the *Siegfried* drove toward its rendezvous. Kane flung himself into the navigator's seat, and glancing ever and anon at the figures for the original course, began to punch keys on the calculator. Manning hunched over the controls, continuing an intensive study that had begun over the German pilot's shoulder. And Vzryvov stationed himself before a black box fixed to the wall beneath a large clock and conspicuously sealed with a *Hakenkruz*.

Dugan was left without a job; but he was content to slump into an unused seat and think queasily of Earth thousands of miles below. He was out of his element here—but so were the others. None of them had ever been into space before; only Kane had a theoretical acquaintance with rocket navigation.

So they worked like men inspired to alter the course of the ship. It would have been utterly impossible to make all the needful calculations from the beginning; but Kane was able to work from the course already laid out and the dead navigator's correction tables, making small changes, which would mean life for millions of people and death for other millions.

Five minutes before the revised zero-time, Manning, his face like iron, shut off the engines. There must be no expanding rocket gases to interfere with the dust's dispersion. The sudden silence and weightlessness were like a bad dream. Dugan gulped, floated into a corner and was sick. Even Kane's face looked green under the unchanged light of the control room. But Vzryvov had broken the swastika seal on the black box and eyed the switch inside it greedily, between frequent glances at the clock.

WITH the second-hand sweeping into the last minute, he grasped the plastic handle, and at forty-five seconds pulled down. Instantly the stifling silence of the ship was broken by a muffled roar. The dust—not dust really, but exceedingly fine shot, heavy enough that it would not be carried away by winds in Earth's atmosphere—was being flung into space through many nozzles in the *Siegfried's* hull.

"That's that," said Kane in a flat voice.

Vzryvov swung about in his seat, facing the others, but he did not look at them. His eyes were far away and his teeth bared in a ferocious grin as he listened to the escaping storm of death.

"*Dostalos' sukinym synam,*" he muttered to himself. "*Za Ameriku i za Rossiyu!*"

Manning said nothing.

They suffered through ten minutes of weightlessness while the dust was discharging, and waited another ten before they dared start the engines again and swing the ship—careless now of fine points of navigation—on a great arc toward Earth.

"It'll be forty hours, plus or minus, before the stuff hits the atmosphere," said Kane. "The Germans are going to real-

ize something is wrong before then—pretty soon, I imagine, because every observatory will be watching the cloud. We'll do better to stay out here."

Manning shrugged. Kane looked at him with understanding and sympathy. "There's still work for us. By now the general uprising will have started in America, and maybe spread to other countries; it was to be our organization's last effort, in case we couldn't stop the dust ship. And the ship took off . . . Let's see if we can pick up some broadcasts."

They did, after accelerating the ship and throwing it into a low, hastily-calculated orbit. At first the destroyers had no word of their work. The news was all about the fierce flare of rebellion in America; though they didn't say so, it must have caught the few Germans there in the throes of departure before the coming doom. An attack on the Long Island colony was in progress, the bridges blown and the East River aflame with burning oil. Then the insanely desperate rebels had found their way onto the island and overwhelmed the settlement. The air crackled with eye-witness accounts of atrocities against the master race. The German leaders were turning the insurrection to account, using it to prepare the minds of their own people to accept the fait accompli of America's extermination.

Then came a pause in the news broadcasts. A German station played music . . .

Somewhere a group of rulers must be sitting in hasty council, staring unbelievably at the astronomers' reports. Having to believe, and trying to make a decision where there was no more deciding to do, because their future was as immutable as the velocity and direction of the dust cloud in space.

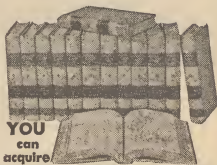
They had to make it public, of course, so that there could be an attempt at evacuation. Twenty-first century Germany was a nation of motors, wheels, and wings, and a day and a half might yet be time for a large part of the population to flee beyond the limits of the dust-fall which would cover Greater Germany from the Rhineland to the Volga. If the exodus was orderly, the radio emphasized again and again . . .

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FOR the first few hours it was both orderly and successful, according to report. But the announcement that Germany's catastrophe had carried to hidden ears beyond its boundaries, and the word had passed like lightning around the world, telling all nations that the moment of deliverance had come. Four hours afterward, and American station went on the air; and the listeners in the space ship tensed as they heard the English words.

"Three or four thousand air-borne refugees are reported landing on the Florida coast. The local revolutionary authorities have taken steps for their reception . . . A dispatch from France states that a refugee column of about twenty thousand Germans was overwhelmed and wiped out, despite defense by armored vehicles, in the vicinity of Lyons . . . Similarly we hear from Italy . . ."

The transmission was weak and the voice faded out, but it went on, counting up with unholy glee the victories and the massacres. All over Earth, people were digging up the guns that had laid buried for a hundred years, and when those were lacking, seizing scythes and axes, sticks and stones, and going out to meet the fleeing Germans. The German military retaliated by unloading its whole arsenal of atomic and other weapons against the rebelling peoples. But the world was mad with blood and liberty. What if for every German ten of their ex-slaves died? Soon there would be no more Germans . . .

Other radio stations began to be heard, babbling in strange tongues that had not been spoken over the air for a century, but all reciting the same burden of hate and holocaust, glorying in the tales of carnage that they called to each other across the Earth.

Marshaled by leaders who rose to power on the wings of a shout, or with no leaders at all, the hordes poured even across the borders of the Reich, into the doomed area. Such German radio stations as were still operating showed by their frantic and contradictory efforts to direct the evacuation the hopeless panic and confusion that had fallen on the *Herrenvolk* in its last hour. Perhaps they had once been a people of blood and iron, but if so they were that

no longer after a century of security and peaceful prosperity behind their impregnable bulwarks; and the refugees, fleeing those defenses now, were like fat tame rabbits escaping a burning hutch and falling victim, terrified and uncomprehending, to the claws and fangs and primeval savagery of the wild. Germany had sowed the wind for a hundred years, and the storm that had arisen would not soon abate . . .

From time to time during the vigil in the space ship, Kane turned thin-lipped from the broadcasts to attempt contact with a secret transmitter in the New York area. Finally, thirty hours after the dust had started on its way, he got through and talked with an underground leader he knew.

"It's out of our hands," the man on Earth reported tersely. "At first we made some headway in organizing the revolt. We're still trying to influence the mobs in the direction of elementary caution, but it's thankless work and even dangerous. The people are following demagogues sprung from nowhere, following whatever voice promises the most killing. I think they're even fighting each other in some places. . ."

"Anarchy," said Kane numbly. "A new Dark Age—"

"What else did you expect?" demanded Vzryvov scornfully. "Surely not that people enslaved so long would promptly proceed to set up orderly self-government as soon as they were free? The Dark Ages have been everywhere, except in Germany, for the last century; you don't imagine that because Germany falls, the rest of the world will become civilized again?"

"No. . . But I must have hoped it; I think we all did. Guess you're the only realist I know, Igor." Kane straightened his shoulders. "We might as well land. Maybe there's still a chance to bring something decent out of this mess when the smoke clears. Anyway, I'd rather get into the thick of it than sit out here listening any longer. We shouldn't have anything more to fear from the Germans."

Manning, who had sat for long brooding silently over the controls, looked up sharply. "Before we start down," he said, "I'd like to ask a last favor."

MANNING smiled grimly. "One way or another. I just want one of those emergency-escape gliders we saw when we were hiding down below. You mean to land in America, I guess, but before you do I wish you'd take a little swing out of your way and drop me off in one of those over Germany. I don't know whether Eddie will want to go with me—"

"Hell, what do you take me for?" asked Dugan aggrievedly. "Maybe you've cracked up—but I'll take a chance."

"I think you *have* gone crazy," said Kane "If the Germans didn't get you, the dust would."

"It's a chance, all right. . . But I've been thinking about how Kahl's time machine disappeared, back there in the Black Forest. It was powered by ordinary storage cells, and when he turned it on and left it on it used them up in a hurry. But in rapid discharge polarization will stop the flow of current in a battery before the charge is all gone—and after it's rested a little, it'll give out some more. I think that's what happened. We left the switch closed, and when the batteries depolarized they gave another kick. So the time traveler went on—into the future again. Not very far, maybe. Maybe only a couple of days."

"So—you think it may be there now. And if it is?"

"Those gliders have a battery-powered auxiliary motor, don't they? If we land near the machine, we can get it going again and return to our own time, or a few years earlier."

"I don't blame you for wanting to, but—"

"It's not just that." Manning's eyes met Kane's and held them with odd intensity. He asked slowly: "Wouldn't it have been better, Kane, if the last hundred years of history had never happened?"

Kane stared at him, first blankly and then with dawning understanding. "But—that's impossible," he stammered. "A paradox."

"Paradoxes are an occupational disease of time travel, I guess. . . I don't know just what we can do, if we do get back. We'd have to be careful or we might end up in a



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padded cell. We couldn't hope to prevent the development of atomic energy—that seems inevitable, with progress—but we might warn America in time to assure our beating the Germans to the punch."

Kane said quietly, "It's true that our world has taken a wrong turning. What you suggest, Manning, is quite unimaginable—but it's possible, all the same—an experimental destiny, perhaps. Anyway, I'll help you get the glider ready."

"Would you like to come with us?"

Kane shook his head. "Whether this world is real or not, I belong to it. And you'll be bucking enough paradoxes as it is."

THE glider dropped at first like a stone from the great height; then its wings began to find support and it descended in vast looping turns that in the troposphere became at last a tightly circling glide over the Schwarzwald. The air over Germany was empty; now, short hours before the coming of the dust, everyone who could command aerial transportation had escaped from the country. But the roads, from the great *Autobahnen* to the narrowest country lanes, were crawling with traffic, snarled and choked by the fear that drove it.

Manning strained his eyes for landmarks as they lost altitude; he wanted to spare the batteries in the glider.

"Say," remarked Dugan worriedly, "if we find the thing, how far do you figure on going back?"

"Mmm—say 1935. We'll need a few years to work if we're going to change history."

"We might meet ourselves!" Dugan voiced his fears.

Manning grinned. "We ought to be able to duck ourselves. We know where we were, don't we?"

Dugan digested that, then advanced another problem: "If we go back to 1935, I'll only be thirty when the war starts. What do they do when two of a guy try to enlist in the Army at once, especially if he's already missing four years later?"

"Maybe there won't be any war."

"Want to bet?"

"No," answered Manning soberly. But a moment later his face lit as he recog-

nized, only a couple of miles away, the big clearing on the plateau where the time traveler had rested.

Minutes later, he set the glider bumpily down on the meadow. From on high the sun had been visible, but here only a gray dawn was breaking. Where the forest fire had passed the trees raised black desolate arms to the light, but those still green were greeting the morning with cool balsam scent and awakening bird song, oblivious of the rain of death falling through space to wipe out all life in this land.

They climbed out of the glider—and froze, for in the same moment both saw the two long black cars, one with an official swastika on its sleek flank, that were parked under the trees, and the uniformed men who were springing to their feet around the vehicles and lifting rifles.

"Turn on your invisibility unit and run for the woods!" hissed Manning. The soldiers gaped for seconds at the spot where the arrivals from the sky had vanished, then fired a useless volley at the glider and huddled together in panic.

Both of the Americans were wearing the units Kane had given them, but had tucked the hoods under their belts. Manning stumbled, unable to see his own feet as he ran, and paused on the edge of the woods to cram his hood down over his head. As he did so he saw Dugan a few yards away, doing likewise.

"Somebody's got the same idea as us!" called Manning. "Maybe Kahl convinced them, or— We'd better get there fast!"

They plunged through the fire-cleared woodland toward their goal. From behind a voice shrieked warning to someone ahead: "*Hutet euch! Zwei Unsichtbare!*"

Then they saw among the trees the cubical bulk of the time machine. Its door was open, and around it was a squad of soldiers who gripped their weapons with shaking hands and peered wild-eyed about them.

"Never mind them!" gasped Manning. "There's somebody inside——"

THE WORDS died on his lips. In the doorway of the traveler had appeared a big man in civilian clothes. His face was hidden beneath a hood exactly

like their own, in his hands was a machine gun, and he was looking at them.

"Schwinzog!" Manning recognized the beefy figure.

"*Sie kennen mich? Aber natürlich—* you are the other two time travelers!" The gun's muzzle moved in a peremptory arc. "Remove those masks, please. I want to be sure that it is really you who have come to see me off."

Manning wavered, torn by a suicidal impulse to rush the machine gun and get it over with. But despair lamed him. He thought numbly, "Time is immutable after all, and something was sure to stop us from changing what's already happened. The fatalists are right." He bowed his head and slipped off the wired hood; then he could no longer see it or his own hands. He felt still more like a ghost, impotent to stir reality.

"Now the invisibility units," ordered Schwinzog. "Throw them in front of you." As Manning and Dugan became visible, the goggling soldiers that surrounded them snapped up their rifles to cover them.

Schwinzog pushed back his hood and eyed them with satisfaction. "It is good that you are accounted for—though I was not much worried about you, and I understand you do not know the principle of the *Zeitfahrer*. And you have brought me two more specimens of the invisibility device, which will be useful for study to the German scientists of four years ago—before they were invented in America." He chuckled at the thought. "You realize, the debacle of Germany, the frightful catastrophe engineered by American cunning—will—never take place. I will see to that—that this now shall be only the illusion of might have been. . . As to what will become of you, that is an almost metaphysical problem—I think I will set the Herr Doktor Kahl to work on it, when more pressing affairs have been seen to."

"You will do what?" broke in a weakly querulous voice.

In the entrance of the time traveler had appeared the hunched figure of Kahl. He blinked at the light; his goatee was tattered and his face twitched. Behind him the



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massive shoulders of Wolfgang blocked the doorway; he wore a twenty-first century German uniform and an air of contentment that showed him, at least, to have found his niche in the world of the future.

Schwinzog half turned. What I will do is my own business," he said curtly. "And you—will refrain from asking unnecessary questions. The *Zeitfahrer* is ready?"

"It is ready for a displacement of four years, which you told me was to be only a test—before we return, as you promised, to the twentieth century, and use this era's knowledge to prevent Germany from conquering the world——"

"Of course, said Schwinzig smoothly. "That is what we shall do."

"You are lying!" Kahl glared at him, his fists clenching. "I heard what you told the Americans."

Schwinzog shrugged. "All right, I am lying." He looked contemptuously down at the little physicist. "Do not bring on yourself again the consequences of stubbornness. You have earned the gratitude of the Reich, and I will see that you are rewarded if you are sensible——"

The other had begun to tremble. "I want only one reward. That is to see Germany saved from the curse of world empire! From the hatred of the whole Earth, which almost destroyed our country in my time and has destroyed it in this! Better even that we Germans should be the oppressed, rather than reap the oppressor's harvest of hate. . ."

Schwinzog's lips curled. "The Herr Doktor has lost his mind. I will have to operate the *Zeitfahrer* myself—Muller!"

The tall Wolfgang sidestepped and thrust out an arm, stopping Kahl's stumbling rush for the doorway and sending the old man staggering to sprawl at Schwinzog's feet.

"You would leave without us?" inquired the Gestapoleiter mockingly. "For that, it would be only just to leave you here—but do not fear. You will still be useful. And now we have no more time for——"

WITH a burst of strength that seemed in him incredible, Kahl surged to his feet and flung himself on Schwinzog with an animal scream. The big man,

caught off balance in his negligent pose, was hurled backward and fell clutching; his head thudded solidly against the time traveler's metal sheathing. Kahl twisted free and swayed to his feet, and the machine gun was in his hands; it bucked and spat as he swung it in a jerky arc. Wolfgang, caught in mid-leap, crashed to the ground and rolled, and the German soldiers scattered wildly, firing a few shots that were aimed more away from Schwinzog than at Kahl. One man was too slow and dropped at the edge of the unburned thicket, and a couple of others yelped as they fled.

Dr. Kahl went on raining bullets into the bushes for seconds after there were no more targets; then he stood breathing hard and glaring about him at the bodies sprawled on the scorched turf.

One of the bodies got unhurriedly to its feet and faced Kahl. It was Manning. The fatalistic paralysis that had gripped him had passed off abruptly when he saw Schwinzog fall, and he had thrown himself flat under the sweeping bursts of machine gun fire.

He said coolly, "Good work, Herr Doktor. Now we can get back to our own century."

Kahl did not answer or seem to hear. The muzzle of the weapon he held was centered on Manning's chest, and the eyes above it were mad.

"We must return now, and carry out your plan," Manning urged softly. As he talked he was walking without haste toward the gun. He did not dare glance aside to see what had happened to Dugan, or let even his expression betray his terrible eagerness to seize the moment—before Kahl went completely off the deep end, or before the Germans back there in the bushes collected their wits.

"You are American," scowled Kahl. "One of those who hate us. What have I to do with you?"

"I will help you," said Manning. "Your plan is good. Germany and all the world will revere your name when they know." He halted, almost touching the gun muzzle. In a moment now he had to grab it.

"I do not know——" began Kahl, blinking. Then his eyes widened blankly;

something had plucked at Manning's sleeve, and from somewhere in the thick-
et came a rifle's crack. The Herr Doktor
crumpled to the ground.

From behind him appeared Dugan,
straightening from a crouch; without a
word he sprang for the door of the time
traveler. Manning followed, ducking un-
der another bullet from the woods. He
slammed the door shut.

"What'd you take a chance like that
for?" demanded Dugan bitterly. "I was
sneaking round behind him all the time."

Manning didn't answer. He was sur-
veying the apparatus-covered table, hesi-
tating over its complexity.

Outside rifles began banging steadily.
The metal shell of the machine rang and
splinters flew from the wooden door as
bullets came through to ricochet danger-
ously inside. Manning's mouth set and
with a quick wrist-flip he closed the start-
ing switch.

And there was silence.

DUGAN peered cautiously through a
shattered door-panel. "There hasn't
been any fire," he said almost without
wonder. "The trees are green."

Manning bent tensely over the table.
"Four years backward," he nodded. "Now,
if I can just find out how much power
that took. . ."

Half an hour later for them, it was
1935, an evening with the first chill of fall
in the air.

"Too bad we lost the invisibility units,"
grieved Manning. "There's nothing now
to prove we ever travelled in time—
except the traveler itself, and we can hardly
carry that with us to America. . . And
Kahl and Wolfgang make another paradox
we didn't think of. They died in a time
that never will be."

"Hell, what's another paradox," said
Dugan. "We've got our work cut out for
us without worrying about them."

Regretfully they smashed the time-trav-
eler's mechanism—lest it fall into still
other hands anxious to remodel history—
and set out on foot with a good chance of
making the Swiss border by dawn.

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Perhaps it would be safer to address you from the floor, on which we are now gingerly seated. We print the most interesting letters you send us, the most-typed-on-one-side-double-spaced-not-over-two-pages-long communications.

And then everybody reads your letters and sits down and writes letters themselves, saying your effort stank, but to give you first, second or third place. We add up all these votes and maybe find you really won first, second or third. Goody for you—that means you win an original illustration!

Here's how it works. You write now. Your letter is run in the next issue. The votes are in and announced in the issue after that. You drop us a card as soon as you find out and—GET THIS—you choose from the illustrations in *this* issue, because this is the one you wrote about. Also, if you won a first place, you only pick *one*—your choice. If you won a second, you pick *two*—in case the first-place winner has already picked the one you want. If third, you name *three*—leaving you with still a choice after Nos. 1 and 2 have taken theirs. The first one you name will be sent you, if not taken. We send you the original. The cover paintings are not sent anybody.

Now, T. H. Carter, pick one. A. A. Gilliland, pick two. George Ebey, pick three. All choices to be made from the Fall Ish.

Get with it, gang!

—PROPHET OF THE LUNATIC PHERINGE.

ATOMBOMMIC, FUTCHAIRTONIC

Box 671,
Port Washington, N. Y.

DEAR! DEAR! EDITOR:

What catastrophical conglomeration of caterwauling catamounts and confusing conversation hast thou collected to confound the wary reader? Oh, well, as my old friend P. B. Shelley recently told me at a seance: "O wind (did he mean you), if Winter PLANET STORIES comes with scarce half the stories worthy of the name, can the Spring issue be far behind?" Good old Percy, may he rest in peace, and not as so many characters in your stories rest—in pieces.

In this, the most important election to be held this year, I cast four votes to that author with the alphabetical initials, A. B. Chandler; and may he be "happy" with them. *Mutiny on Venus* was amply supplied with plot and description, and the characterization of Dillon was superb. It is my belief that far too many STF authors have superman complexes, and, believe me, a story of this class comes as a most pleasant relief from the run-of-the-mill stuff. By the way, Mr. Chandler, I hope you don't mind my giving you only four votes, since when I went to register for the fifth time, I was informed of a little known rule that one is only

permitted to vote once for each head one possesses.

It would indeed be a shame to put a powerful story, and a beautifully written one, too, like Leigh Brackett's Martian epic, in a second position; so, since we passed our drivelling tests this morning with flying corpuscles, thereby obtaining our poet's license, we immediately invoke its miraculous powers and vote for first place, Leigh Brackett's *The Beast-Jewel of Mars*.

Also to be mentioned, and not too unfavorably, is Ray Bradbury who provides the contrast. Whilst hero in story preceding *A in A* is accidentally dropping things, thus killing off all the villains; and hero in succeeding story is watching villains kill each other and selves; good old Ray is still in the Bradbury rut—er, groove—he has villains kill hero, mmmmm, much nice—must remember to fasten cyclotronic, atombombic, futchhairtomic bomb to Bradbury's typewriter bell the next time his astral body visits his study. Make lovely dingbang racket, you bet.

And so to Vizigraph. . . . Vote for Mr. Gilliland first, for his very fair humor, next Thomas H. Carter for exceedingly logical dissertation, then George Ebey, nice writing—would you call it sarcastic or satirical, I am very vague about those words?

Well that's all, except that Shelley sends his regards to the potentate of the Lunarian Polygarchy.

Sincerely,

W. L. WILLIAMS

REVIEWS FIRST THREE VOLUMES

4 Spring Street,
Lubec, Maine

DEAR EDITOR:

I have just gathered my notes and put aside the stacks of PLANET STORIES. What notes? Why the stacks of PS? Vol. III, No. 12, of good ole PS has rolled around and I've done some researching—so. . . . Herewith I present my review of the first three volumes of PLANET STORIES. I've tried to cover everything and I hope this isn't too long!

There have been 104 authors (pen-names and collaborations counted) who have written 279 stories. There are 17 authors with more than five stories under one name. Ross Rocklynne leads with 15, followed by Nelson Bond with 14, Bradbury and Cummings each with 11 and Brackett has 10. Collaborations are not counted.

Top artists have been (in rough chronological order) Paul, Lynch, Morey, Bok and A. Leydenfrost in Volume I. In Volume II, Paul, both Leydenfrost, Rubimor, Ingels, Elias, Doolin, Potter, Clyne, Murphy and Kiemle. In Volume III, McWilliams is tops, Vestal, Rubimor (Rube Moore), Martin, Hardison, Donel, Kiemle, Doolin and Napoli follow up.

About the best covers were: Volume I, Finlay's for Summer 1941. Volume II, Winter 1943 ties with Summer 1944. Volume III, Anderson's for Spring 1947. The worst cover ever was the Fall 1946 one. It was hard picking best covers, let me tell you!

Now for the best stories according to each issue (mostly my own opinion, of course):

Winter, 1939—*Expedition to Pluto*, Pratt & Manning.

Spring, 1940—*Dictator of Time*, Nelson S. Bond.

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Summer, 1940—*Space Liner X-87*, Ray Cummings.

Fall, 1940—*The Ultimate Salient*, Nelson S. Bond.

Winter, 1940—*One Thousand Miles Below*, Eando Binder.

Spring, 1941—*Exiles of the Desert Star*, Ross Rocklynne.

Summer, 1941—*Proktoles of Neptune*, Henry Hasse.

Fall, 1941—*Vassals of the Master-World*, Eando Binder.

Winter, 1941—*The Lorelei Death*, Nelson S. Bond.

Spring, 1942—*Black Friar to the Flame*, Isaac Asimov.

Summer, 1942—*Out of This World*, Henry Hasse.

Fall, 1942—*City of the Living Flame*, Henry Hasse.

That's Volume I and this system takes up too much room! I'll go on to Volume II next, like this: No. 1, *Colossus of Chaos* by Nelson Bond; No. 2, *Citadel of Lost Ships* by Leigh Brackett; No. 3, *Alcatraz of the Starways* by Hasse and De Pina; No. 4, *Phantom Out of Time* by Bond; No. 5, *Crypt-City of the Deathless Ones* by Kuttner; No. 6, *Wanderers of the Wolf-Moon* by Bond; No. 7, *Minions of the Crystal Sphere* by De Pina; No. 8, *The Citadel of Death*; No. 9, *Colony of the Unfit* by Carl Selwyn; No. 10, *Vandals of the Void* by Robert Wilson; No. 11, *Spider-Men of Gharr* by W. Scott Peacock; and No. 12, *The Last Monster* by Gardner F. Fox.

Volume III: No. 1, *The Great Green Blight* by McDowell; No. 2, *What Hath Me?* by Kuttner; No. 3, *The Million Year Picnic* by Ray Bradbury; No. 4, *The Creatures That Time Forgot* by Bradbury; No. 5, *The Man the Sun-Gods Made* by Fox; No. 6, *Beyond the Yellow Fog* by McDowell; No. 7, *Vassals of the Lode-Star* by Fox; No. 8, *Beneath the Red World's Crust* by Fennel; No. 9, *Earth Is Missing!* by Carl Selwyn; No. 10, *The Outcasts of Solar III* by McDowell; No. 11, *Pillar of Fire* by Bradbury; and No. 12, *Synthetic Hero* by Eric Fennel. Phew! That covers all three volumes. About the best all-round issue of each volume was: Vol. I, Spring 1942; Vol. II, Winter 1943 and Vol. III, Summer 1947.

I hope you can squeeze this in for I worked hard on this, I did!

STFanatically,

Ed Cox

FELLOW ANTHROPOIDS

433 E. Chapin St.,
Cadillac, Mich.

PSST, PLP:

Lean over close, chum. Closer. Closer. That's it. Now I wouldn't want this to get around, ya know, but . . . lean closer . . . PLANET IS SLIPPING!!!! Did I say slipping? (Check back and see. Yes, I said slipping.) Well, I mean PLANET is slipped!

In the vast halls of pulp fame no other zine has ever sunk to such a sub-fanzine level as the Winter PLANET.

The BEM-ice of Slobovia by Lay Brakkkkk. Even the illustrator didn't like it. He obviously drew those pix for some other story, as they have nothing to do with this one. In the story everybody is very happily nude, but both cover and

head pic show everybody disgustingly dressed. Maybe you schmoes have a split personality, half lewd, half prude. When the story calls for nudes, I want to see FLESH! Understand, FLESH! So much for that

The Little Monsters Move Towardward by Cummings, or Lilliput Revisited. And why, may I ask, did Allen Nixon have to be a gator-fighter? The whole story would have been just the same if he'd been a Fuller brush man from Dogpatch, and it would have been easier to identify myself with the hero. And Tork's growing act was a little hard to swallow, to say the least. What in Floor was all that extra Tork made out of anyway? Rayz imagination? If so, it's small wonder that he got licked, being built of such weak material.

Mutiny on Venus by A. B. C. What sea stories magazine was this rejected by? And does old man Chandler mean to stand there with his teeth in a glass and his bare plot hanging out and tell us that in the daze after interplanetary travel and colonization they will be still using the same sort of cargo tubs as we use now? BEMs on him.

The Death from Orion by Matthews. This story would be a swell movie or radio serial, or a pretty fair kiddie comic, but all this cops-and-robbers and cat's-whisker escape stuff is disgusting in a real, grown-up PLP magazine.

Jinx Ship to the Rescue by Jr. Almost readable, but I see everybody is still standing ankle deep in Venus mud. According to the latest scientific findings of ye spectrograph, there is not one drop of water on all Venus, let alone mud. It now appears that Venus is just one great big unsanitary dust bowl, and the reason we can't see the surface is because it is hidden by dust storms of such size and fury that it is hard even to imagine them.

In His Image by Walton. Oh, brother, if Bryce Walton isn't a pen name for W. A. Dwiggins, ol' Walton better brace himself for a plagiarism suit. In His Image was lifted bodily from Dwiggins' little STF drama, "Millennium I" (Alfred A. Knopf, Publishers).

Asleep in Armageddon by Bradbury. A classic, as usual. Why don't you ever give this boy a cover spread? He's the only reason I ever buy yer glorified fanzine. That illo is the best in the ish, but sort of nutz. I see three radio headsets, five Saturns, and four spaceships, three in seemingly wonderful condition, one busted up, and is that a ship rudder I see on the wrecked one? GAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH! It sure does capture the mood of the story.

The Burnt PLANET by Brittain. How did he know that that was what I was going to do with it?

Time Trap by Long. I CAN'T STAND TIME STORIES! Please, please, Mister Payne, (slobber, slobber) no more of this. The time machine, the alternate probability geegaws, and all the time warpers, twisters, biters, kickers, and clawers started out with an innocent little story device used by H. G. Wells to plant a hero into the arms of a beautiful little fem in the future, and now it has come to this. We all know time travel is impossible, let alone time "collapsing." Time is just the distance between two or more events, nothing more. So stop all this before I go MAD!

The Vizigraph by the anthropoids of Upper Thecreek. Beer, that a revolting conglomeration of degenerate subhumanity! Give the fust prize to A. A. Gilliland, Paul D. Cox gets second, and

James Blish takes third because he agrees with me. Send Ray Johnson a bomb; I can't afford it but it's got to be done, you know. I refuse to comment on the race question as I make it my policy never to argue with people whose heads come to a point. I will only say this, "Ever heard of George Washington Carver, ye Ku Kluxers?"

Enuff sed,
RADELL FARADAY NELSON, BEM

PROCTOR TO SIGLER

Department of Biology,
Temple University
Philadelphia 22, Pa.

DEAR MR. SIGLER:

A few days ago, while reading a copy of the Fall, 1948, PLANET STORIES, I noticed your letter to the editor. It seemed to be the product of an active and logical mind (in spite of the rather odd remarks about theoretical scientists, who seem to be among the most poorly understood people on earth!), so that I found the closing paragraphs about races surprising in their unquestioning acceptance of some widely-held but quite erroneous views on this subject. If you will bear with me, I would like to present a few of these matters as I see them.

Dealing with your statements in order, I shall say little about the question of climatic influence on mental vigor, as you are probably right in your assumption. Unfortunately for the total context of the paragraph, however, the term "mental vigor" can hardly be defined except in terms of achievement, which is an unreliable index in that it has not been clearly demonstrated how one achievement can satisfactorily be compared with another. I presume you are referring mainly to Negroes when you mention "lesser races," and that your reason for assigning them an inferior status is that they fail to produce fairly proportionate achievements as compared with whites. This is an untenable argument, as it is based on standards of achievement entirely of white origin.

As far as ancient civilizations are concerned, anthropological research has shown quite conclusively that mankind has been predominantly a "mongrel" lot since the dawn of history. It is quite possible in fact, that the mingling of previously isolated and more or less sharply differentiated races may have been an important stimulus to the beginnings of civilization. There simply is no such thing as a "builder race," and so far as we know, there never has been. Certainly the idea that "strong and vigorous blood" can be "diluted" or "attenuated" is a most unfortunate fallacy.

Quite the contrary, it is generally true that persons (like most other animals and most plants) of unlike heredity (primarily within the limits of a species) tend to produce the most vigorous or adaptable offspring, and that close inbreeding of groups having a very similar heredity tends to emphasize many undesirable characteristics that would otherwise appear much less often. And I can assure you that, despite various obvious (but intergrading) racial differences, all of mankind belongs to the same biological species.

The "scientists" (unnamed) whom you state have warned about dilution of white "blood" with

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negro "blood" (though *blood* has nothing to do with it) were apparently unaware of the fact that nearly all of the present-day negroes of the United States are of hybrid origin (immediate or remote). (If race "dilution" be a crime, it is the whites who have committed it, not the negroes), that the percentage of so-called "pure" whites is somewhat lower than many people suspect (not that this is an unusual situation or cause for alarm), that a hybrid human being of any category is more apt than not to be just as effective a member of society as one who is not demonstrably a hybrid (if fully allowed the opportunity), that the idea of United States vigor being at least partly due to its "melting pot" nature is basically sound, and that the present state of psychological knowledge does not permit adequate correlation between mental attributes and such physical characteristics as skin color, etc.

I would like to suggest that, for more detailed and authoritative information than I can give off-hand, you might read the little book entitled *Heredity, Race, and Society*, by Dunn and Dobzhansky (two of the leading geneticists in the United States), published by Penguin Books for 35 cents.

In conclusion, let me say that the above remarks do not imply that I advocate immediate and total intermarriage between all races. My position is that the question of whether or not to marry someone of a different race should be entirely the private concern of each person, since it is quite clear that the human species has far more to fear from other quarters, and since presumably our American social system is based fundamentally on individual rights (despite widespread violation of this principle in one form or another, especially in the South).

I would be very pleased to hear from you if you have any comments, constructive or otherwise.

Sincerely yours,

GEORGE R. PROCTOR,
Instructor of Biology.

SIGLER TO PROCTOR

1028 N. Broadway,
Wichita 5, Kansas

DEAR EDITOR:

It seems as if everybody and his brother simply has to take issue with me on some of my statements. Oh, well it doesn't hurt to argue a little bit. Mr. Proctor has raised a few questions that I will try to answer.

In the first place I did not put the race degeneration idea forward as my own. I simply said that some scientists hold it. I do not know whether it is true, but I do know that plenty of evidence could be gathered to indicate it.

I disagree with Mr. Proctor that there is no such thing as a Builder race and a slave race. Perhaps not, but unless the Archeologists are at fault, these ancient civilizations were founded by a group that came into a territory and, enslaving the primitive inhabitants, built a culture that was higher than the first one. In other cases the culture rose in the district where the higher ones originated and enslaved people from other districts.

The builders and slaves were not always of entirely different races and frequently were of the same race but of different groups. There

were times, too, when the two groups would change places. Thus at one time the Babylonians were top dog, only to be overthrown by the Medes and Persians under Darius. In turn these fell before the Greeks under Alexander. After the Greeks had their day they gave place to Rome who in turn fell before the barbarians who became the modern Europeans.

Now in all these cases there was at each time a group that built a culture and another group that acted as a subject race. According to the Archeologists these cultures were immeasurably superior to the primitive cultures they displaced. The race that was subservient would learn of the methods of their conquerors but were in no position to imitate it. Their arms were about the same as their conquerors, but they lacked the vigor to withstand the invaders.

However, as the centuries passed the conquering class reached the peak of their development and began to backslide. This process was hastened by the fact that they ceased to look down on their subjects and began to intermarry. Since the servant group was less capable of leading fewer and fewer real leaders were produced. Thus the bestialities of such men as Nero could not take place until there were few people who could lead the nation on the path to greatness.

These excesses took place not because Nero was so much fouler than the others but because the people had become so degenerate that they applauded. Whenever a nation reached this point it was only a matter of time until it fell. When this occurred the remnants of the higher class were either killed or taken into slavery. The people that were left behind were mostly of the peasantry who lacked the knowledge or the will to carry on.

Thus they would revert to a more primitive form of life and forget their greatness remembering them only in legends of gods and goddesses. Thus the term mongrel refers to the fact that the people were decadent.

Anyone who sees the natives who survive these ancient cultures would have to admit that they are quite different from their ancestors. They are generally coarser and more degraded. So, whether these scientists are right or wrong, there is plenty of evidence to back them up.

I know that there is no difference in the physical blood but I think that a biologist like Mr. Proctor ought to know that the term refers to the physical and mental qualities that a person inherits from his or her parents. The laws of heredity have been pretty well established by this time.

The statement about the attenuation of the Negro blood refers to the time that there might be no all white people in the United States. Some fools want it to be that way. These same scientists hold that it would bring disaster upon the nation for the simple reason that there would no longer be the leaders that are needed if a nation is to survive. The black race has so far produced very few. Not because they are held down but because so few of them have had the quality of leadership. If a person is a real leader he can't be held down.

As to allowing intermarriages that is silly. The victim of such action could not inherit any vigor from the lower race because it isn't there and he couldn't inherit any good qualities from the other parent because only scum would wish to intermarry. Since the term here refers to Negro and

white marriages mainly, the following would be the result. The poor child would be neither white or black. What strength he might have inherited from the white would be submerged in the slothfulness of the black. He would not want to associate with blacks and could not associate with whites. If he had a sensitive nature his life would be a veritable hell.

No, the law against mixing races serves to protect the possible child as well and has been observed as far back as recorded history runs. Even the ancient Jews practiced it.

Biology may teach a person some things but there are other sciences that have something to teach a person if he is only willing to listen. It is the law of heredity that the lower must always drag down the higher and a person is a fool that attempts to violate it.

As to my hating anybody, I don't. In fact I give about ten days' pay a year for the benefit of these peoples. However, I realize that such questions can never be settled by calling a person names or insisting that he is intolerant. The great rule of life is that each nation or class or race must stand on its own feet and create their own advancement. You cannot give it to them for it must be earned.

Respectfully,

EDWIN SIGLER

IS MAD FOR BRADBURY

1608 Jenny Lind Street,
McKeesport, Pennsylvania

DEAR EDITOR:

I was drifting aimlessly through space a few porgs ago, when a stunning blast of pure energy tore my head from my shoulders and bounced it lightly along the octo-berygium floor of my Solarian scout ship.

My head lay dazed for a moment, unable to comprehend the strange fate which had befallen it. Then through misty veils of darkness came piercing sounds. . . .

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee. . . .

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. . . .

I clutched my head in sudden agony (mentally, that is).

"I am Grumph, bug-eyed monster of PLANET."

"I am Sandra, ravished cover girl of PLANET."

I heard the sound of ripped cloth as Sandra prepared for the next issue.

"What do you want of me?" I shrieked.

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

My head bounced aimlessly from the cylindrical walls of my scout.

"Wait! wait!" I pleaded, "I'm not the fellow who criticizes the cover of PLANET. I like 'em. Let me get back on that lardy body of mine and I'll write the most lavish, encouraging, etc. letter to ye old Ed. I'll make them keep you on the cover. Honest!"

Well, Ed, to make a long story longer, they finally beat it back to Anderson's studio and let me reassemble as best I could.

Seriously, though, I was moved to write almost solely because of that wonderful short by Ray Bradbury. That guy has something that can't be beat. How about a couple of novels or novelets from him? Then he can really spread out.

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The Beast-Jewels, Mutiny on Venus and *Time Trap* were fair fillers . . . the sort of stories that you expect in STF.

As indicated before, *Asleep in Armageddon* was great.

The Death from Orion was above average.

Jinx Ship to the Rescue was only fair.

And now some real criticism. *The Little Monsters Come* was l-o-u-s-y. Why can't a writer use some originality. These Gulliver tales are passé.

Also same for *Burnt Planet*. Earth in ruins . . . ancient or alien race discovers . . . pseudo-punchline ending. Old stuff, Ed, old stuff.

In His Image. I don't like to point fingers. But if you will read *Millennium I*, STF play by W. A. Dwiggins, you will find almost exact duplication of this little tale. Tsk! Tsk!

The Viz was pretty good this issue. My vote on the letters? 1, Johnson. 2, Streiff. 3, Sprenger (for his drawing, above all else).

Well, I guess that's all, Ed; keep the stories from Bradbury rolling and you'll have a steady buyer here.

JOHN KING

QUICK, GRAB HIM!

2146 East 13th South,
Salt Lake City 5, Utah

DEAR MR. PLP:

Sitting in my lonely room I started thinking. Thinking unsurmountable thoughts that were whirling in a mad chaos about me. What started this destiny of my gray cells? Nothing less than Brooklyn Project by William Tenn.

When two famous favorites clash nothing can come out but something that is literary, "Out of this world." Time Travel and Tenn. Ah! the TTT's.

My first question for todays, students, is "Is time travel possible?" Do I hear a mad chaos of Yays and Nays? Goody. To answer the question I say a great, big, emphatic Yes! But to answer the question, "Is it possible to return after you've TT in the same condition?" An emphatic NO is the result of this question.

Assuming that Time Travel is possible, if an object is sent into the past, it must have been there in the first place. Correct? In other words, if a cave man was looking where the object is sent he will see it at that time and not the time that it was sent. But this brings up the old axiom, "Two objects cannot occupy the same place at the same time." Which means that when these two objects meet—the object sent in the future and the object that was there in the first place—a terrific explosion must take place. Could this explosion be represented by the atom bomb, or in other words the atom bomb a representation of TIME TRAVEL?

Assuming that Tenn is right in stating that the object destroys matter in the past causing humans to change simultaneously with this, what would happen if a photographer ground a movie of this change? This is assuming that cameras were still invented after the complete change; thus bringing up the confusing question of, "What would happen to the camera if it was not invented?" By all possibility the public would not accept the movie as all their photographs would have changed.

Which all brings up the erroneous question of, "Why didn't Tenn have the representatives watching the Brooklyn Project look in a mirror so

they could have stopped the Project before this change came about?" Or, to leave with you another confusing question on a confusing subject, "Would the representatives recognize this change instead of believing that that's what they always looked like in the first place?"

I had to ask some one or I'll go crazy, CRAZY, I TELL YOU . . .

Confusingly yours,

CHARLES HENDERSON

ADAM AND EVE OBERFIELD

400 Ontario Street,
Wheeling, West Va.

DEAR PAUL:

I'm in a tizzy. A jet-black one with yellow wings. Why? Well, I've been trying to figure out who's right on the "race" question. I've thought and thought (Oh, yes, I do that, in a crude way) about it, and finally concluded that a lot of people have the wrong idea about what should constitute a superior race. Suppose we analyze a little, then.

Obviously, all parties concerned are men. The question now is, what is a man? Outside of a damfool, I mean. He's an animal. He is born in the same way as any other animal and he dies in much the same way. In fact, man was originally created to live as other animals, with the forest-garden as his home and nature as his mother, his provider. He had a strong constitution to protect him from the elements. He had a swift and powerful body to enable him to provide food for himself and his. Having no need for clothing, he went nude, and, like a small child, was not ashamed. With this he was expected to be—and had good reason to be—contented.

There, if I may be permitted to state it bluntly, is your master race. Why not? There are two parts to a human being; a body and soul. The person and all his traits are only a combination of the two. The body of primitive man had to be superior to ours. The Person? Simple, peaceful, contented; living as man was designed to live, and being perfectly happy in doing so. Pure in spirit. In other words, superior in spirit.

Now, let us see who has done the most good for himself and those around him, or should I say, the least harm? We'll start with the white race. The best claim I can find for this race is scientific advancement. So what? The first example of "scientific advancement" was when Eve saw a snake shedding its skin and started getting ideas about clothing, or whatever it was that happened. You see, she had learned the knowledge of good and evil. It wasn't any unnatural covering for the body was needed by these rugged people. There was no modesty connected with it. Just, it would be "good" to have clothing.

So clothing was good, huh? Well, it sure started a lot of trouble for a good thing; such as reducing natural resistance to the elements (thus inviting certain diseases), making possible things like retarded circulation from a too-tight belt, and foot trouble from tight shoes or perspiring feet, not to mention B.O. Oh, yes! Don't forget the new look. Wife wants a new wardrobe and hubby hasn't the green stuff, so what happens? I'm going home to Mama! Clothing? Oh, how superior!

You can say about the same thing for all other forms of "advancement." Why high prices? Well,

some ancient progressive once got the idea it would be good to take more than you needed and then trade for something else. This was supposed to be better than taking what you needed only from nature's stores, and letting others take what they needed. I can't picture a primitive man having his credit cut off because of lack of money.

The situation is something like this. Man has progressed far since his child-happy primitive stage, but with each advancement he has created a need for something else. The weakening of the body due to clothing produced a need for shelters, the shelters for huts, the huts for houses and heating and better and better houses and heating. Climbing, ever climbing, up and up and up; and with it, a gradual weakening of a once superior body, a continued drawing away from man's only natural, only healthful way of life. Also with it, a growing greed and a growing lust for power, a spreading of vice and gambling and drunkenness. A drawing away from the superior person of Adam. This is the pride of the progressive race.

Don't think that I denounce science, now. What's done is done and there is no turning back. The only logical thing is to keep climbing. Where will it end? Well, Adam was told that Man would surely die.

No, the white race is not the master race, at least to my way of thinking. I might even go so far as to say, there is no such race among men. Even those races that remain relatively primitive today are lost from the perfect way of life. Perhaps they realized in ages past the futility of the entire struggle and resigned themselves. Who knows? But I rather think that the wild things of the forest are more masters of themselves and their environment than any race of men.

One thing more. If anyone thinks a highly scientific race is superior simply because it combats the hellish state of affairs it has brought about through its own doings, or even because it defeats and brings to an end some of its self inflicted evils, I must be a very great writer.

Why? Because many may consider this letter a hellish thing, a foul sore upon the white breast of Fandom. Yet I, by my own hand, without aid from anyone, am able to defeat it and bring it to an end. I am truly a master of masters!

Absolutely yours,

BILL OBERFIELD

FROM CHAD'S DAD

Harper Star Route,
Kerrville, Texas

DEAR EDITOR:

Bong! Round Twenty of the infamous Battle of The Vizigraph is about to begin. In this corner, the Rt. Hon. Paul D. Cox of Georgia . . . an-n-n-d, in this corner, the Oliver Family from Texas. A tense silence falls over the bloody battleground. Battered bodies of former contestants are dragged off the field. Big Chad advances to the middle of the arena, his proper Aryan jaw jutting out grimly. The words begin to fly . . .

First, since Mr. Cox has, for some obscure reason, seen fit to drag my father into the conflict, I'd like to introduce him to readers of La Vizi. I am quite well aware that degrees and whatnot mean nothing in themselves, and include such trivia here merely to get it out of the way

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and answer questions before they are asked. Dad got his A.B. in 1914 at the University of Michigan, his M.D. at the University of Cincinnati in 1918. He is a member of Alpha Omega Alpha, the honorary scholastic fraternity, Sigma Psi, national scientific fraternity, and a couple of others. He practiced surgery for many years, was Director of the Clinical Laboratory at Christ Hospital from 1932 to 1937, taught both medicine and surgery at the University of Cincinnati for fifteen years, and has published numerous papers on assorted medical topics. So much for that. I showed him Mr. Cox's letter, and herewith present his reply:

"In answer to Mr. Cox's questions, I would reply as follows:

"1st. I have never seen any sort of proof that a Negro's brain is smaller than a white man's. There is a great variation in the sizes of human brains, both white and Negro. There is no connection whatever between the size of the brain and the intelligence of the individual. In certain types of Mongolian idiocy, the brain and its membranes are indeed larger than usual. I will take Mr. Cox's advice about reviewing my anthropology—it is a fascinating study that perhaps he, too, should study.

"There is no connection between external physical characteristics of the face and skull and human intelligence—one deals with the bony structure, while the seat of intelligence lies within the brain substance. One might just as well reason that the color of the eyes or the shape of the teeth are indices of human thought. I am also not aware that any single human race or variant thereof possesses any monopoly on intelligence. That was Hitler's fatal mistake and represents the folly of human egotism.

"2nd. That the human brain develops along the suture lines of the skull is also a novel idea without any proof whatsoever. The bones of the skull develop from ossification centers and often take years for their complete development. The sutures represent merely the cementing substance that unites the various bones. The development of the brain, as is commonly known, develops from entirely different types of tissue and goes on throughout an entire human life. One great trouble with many individuals is that this development comes to a halt much too early. Sutures, *per se*, are no indices whatever of brain capacity.

Cordially,

S. F. OLIVER, M.D."

Thar. I trust that will do for the present. In the future, however, I would just as soon that the assorted debaters left my father out of this thing—he is rather busy doing work on TB for the government and I can't keep running to him to find out, say, whether or not an Indian's left big toe was always shrunken when compared to Us Aryans. Anyhoo, I feel quite capable of shouting my own arguments.

To which we now turn, while time remains. First, a few little items to roll over your sutures:

Did you know that the brain of Neanderthal Man was larger than our own? It was 1,625 cubic centimeters. Rather curious, eh wot?

"The Whites are rather generalized: they are the most advanced (or the least ape-like) in having the straightest face, but they have the thinnest, most ape-like lips and the hairiest of bodies." What crackpot made that statement? You'll find

it on Page 221 of *Mankind So Far*, by William Howells of the University of Wisconsin. He goes on to point out that the Negro has fuzzy hair—what primate can you name, gentlemen, with fuzzy hair? In fact, *our* hair is much more ape-like. Egad—can our Exalted Theory backfire? Horrors!

"In short, whether racial differences *exist* or not, at present cultures can in no way be safely explained in terms of racial psychology." Ho hum, another crackpot—this time it's by Dr. Robert H. Lowie, Professor of Anthropology at the University of California. You'll find it in his *An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* . . .

That's enough for now, I think. Such quotes are really futile, because the basic problem is not one of scientific truth, no matter how much either side may froth at the mouth and kiss elderly physics professors. (Achtung, Mr. Kinsey!) The point is, it seems to me, that people are just different. Some people believe that they are Ghu's chosen supermen, while others, like myself, are not so sure and are willing to give any sort of a person the right to be judged on his own merits, whether his skin be white, black, or pale green. Either side, I have no doubt, can prove virtually anything he wishes just by quoting the right books. Such arguments tend to become so bogged down in little details that the fundamental problems just float right on by . . .

I hope you'll see your way clear to print this, Sir Editor—I promise that I won't do it again, barring another challenge. Let's all be pals, boys—I love you all. (Mr. Kinsey! Oh, Mr. Kinsey!)

Ever thine,

CHAD OLIVER

SEE WHAT HE MEANS?

Box 204,
Hartshorne, Oklahoma

DEAR EDITOR:

I hadn't planned to write in again for months, maybe years, but some of the recent letters in *Vizigraph* have annoyed me out of my inertia. They make me gnash my teeth. Wait 'til I slip in my uppers and I'll show you.

First, let me say I liked the Winter Issue of *PLANET*. Brackett's *Beast-Jewel of Mars* was good. Her stuff always is. Bradbury's short was another click. I thought he'd slipped at last when I began reading, but changed my mind before the end. Don't you just love the way he leads the reader to believe that the poor hero (?) has a chance to come out victorious? A rescue ship has arrived two days ahead of schedule. Goody, now our sleepy friend is saved! Nuts. Not when Bradbury is the author.

The other stories were satisfactory. No gripes to register. Though I do want to comment on Cummings' novel. It gives me great pleasure to be able to say that I liked it. In the past I have been bitterly critical of Ray's work. That was when another editor had charge of *PLANET*, so you may not remember. I was sincere, and I still think I was right. That's why I'm glad to be able to praise his work now. His plots used to be all cut from the same pattern of winged girls or maybe some breathless characters rushing in and out of smallness. But I could have taken that. What gave me the screaming meemies was the style he used to inflict on us. He used a tense, streamlined style that heightened the sus-

pense and made the action fairly race along. That was all right for the climax of a story, but too much of such a diet was annoying. When used for the beginning of a story, his style used to seem synthetic and unnatural. For instance, a guy is counting his toes. One, two, three, four, five! He is breathless and excited! For a minute there he thought. . . . But no, they're all there! They're all there!

So I come to this here now question of racial superiority, if any. I note that some of the gang have been giving Sigler and Cox a rugged panning. I believe if we'd all get together and define our terms and clarify our viewpoints we'd find we were closer to agreement than we think. Surely we can all agree that all men, no matter what their size, shape or color, should have equal rights, should have the privilege of owning property, getting an education, voting. The white race has advanced more, scientifically and otherwise, than any other on earth. I don't say it hasn't. But a feeling of racial superiority is dangerous. The American Indian was only a savage until the white man came along. But now the Indian goes to school and makes just as high a mark as anyone. It might be pretty hard to prove that the brain capacity of all races isn't about equal.

All races could live together in peace. I believe they will some day. The barrier is not color. It is psychological. Habits and ideas from the past keep hatred smoldering on both sides. (Yes, I said hatred. Come into the South if you don't believe me.) This condition can't be eliminated in a day. It is going to take time. White people must lay aside arrogance and contempt. Negroes must take the chips off their shoulders, and lay aside their arrogance and contempt. And the whites must take the chips off their shoulders. See what I mean?

Sincerely,

JAMES R. GRAY

BRADLEY VS. BRACKETT

Box 57,
O'Donnell, Tex.

DEAR EDITOR:

Picking a best (or for that matter a worst) from the stories in Winter's *PLANET* is like marking a November ballot—the one we really wanted to read is the one you withheld from print.

Ordinarily good, Brackett goes out of her class trying to write a story reserved for the masters of sadistic logic. She hurries through scenes on which she should linger in fluent delight, drags out the action where reader-imagination runs ahead of her pen, brings in a number of things totally irrelevant and casually disruptive. Instead of following the characters she created in *The Beast-Jewel of Mars* she bends them to her will and, as one book-reviewer puts it—you can hear the plot creaking and clanking as she forces it around the curves.

For continuity of logic there exists a few simple rules which writers of fiction should observe when dabbling in evolutionary trends. In general, Light is masculine and Darkness is feminine. The Source of light is positive and aggressive while the Source of darkness is negative and passive. Bright Space is the son of Dark Space, and his birth took place before any substance was formed. The Sun is a concentrated field of bright

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space rather than the source of brightness, and the planets are fields of darkness which the sun would enlighten throughout—but may only shine upon their outer garments. There is much more to it than just that, but you get the idea.

Prismatic diffusion of a light-beam tends to accentuate the positive qualities and thus bring out their essentially negative counterparts in the guise of opaque substances, a balancing of factors toward which Brackett was groping when she culminated her story with a vague description of that "wriggling anatomy" which had once been the Lady Fand. Here the plot almost got away from Brackett, almost turned to a channel from which she could not swerve it, almost produced a story that would write itself were it not for the crude vehicles it must use in the portrayal. At this point the plot not only creaks and clanks—it groans and screams quite painfully!

There is but one point toward which Fand could move in a return to source, one road by which she could make the journey. The flesh must lose its positive identity and conceal its negative properties, wriggling its way toward the light it must encompass and overcome before merging itself in the Mystery of Darkness. Not knowing how else to accomplish a final stage in the blending of Light and Darkness Brackett resorts to a typically feminine trick and exercises her author's power, by compelling Kor Hal to "run his sword through the creeping horror that had been Fand, through and through again until all motion stopped." Then she turns Kor Hal over to the tender mercies of Burk Winters who "dropped the broken body and went away, taking the sword."

See what I mean? She races past the denouement of Fand as though the hounds of hell were pursuing her! Faster than light, she flies from one vantage point to another, thrusting irrelevant thoughts into our mind from divers angles so that her line-of-travel resembles Rube Goldberg's invention for opening doors without touching buttons.

Reading that story was like riding the Jack Rabbit at a circus—it went every direction except straight. Why must a woman always prove so deceitful at the very moment she gains our trust and confidence?

Sincerely,

ROBERT A. BRADLEY

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF IT

2931 Linden Street,
Berkeley, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

In the Winter Issue of PLANET STORIES there appeared a letter by one Paul Cox giving "scientific" arguments to prove that the Negro is an inferior race. Before refuting Mr. Cox's completely fallacious arguments I'd like to give a short motivational analysis of racial prejudice and show what needs and desires of the individual are satisfied by these beliefs.

1. *Pathological Personality Needs.* An individual with a "free-floating" aggression must aggress against something or someone; his culture may direct him toward a certain racial group. Undetected paranoiacs are often leaders of anti-racial organizations.

2. *Repressed Tensions.* A person having cer-

tain undesirable characteristics may project these characteristics upon other people thus placing many racial groups at a disadvantage.

3. *Need for Self-Respect.* Many individuals with inferiority complexes have the need to feel superior to somebody. They obviously can't feel superior to their neighbors, but they can inflate their ego by feeling superior to some racial group.

It has been demonstrated by a number of experiments that the lower average I.Q. of the American Negro is a product of environmental factors (e.g., lack of educational opportunities) and not to any "racial inferiority." The following experiment conducted by Lapidus is merely one example:

It has been noted that the average intelligence test scores of groups of Negro children in northern states are higher than the average scores of Negro children in the South. This difference could be ascribed to two causes: (1) The difference could be due to selective migration; that is, brighter, more ambitious Negroes may have moved north, and therefore the difference between Negroes in the North and South could indicate a genuine hereditary difference; or (2) The difference could be due to the fact that for the average Negro, educational opportunities are much greater in the North than in the South; thus the difference could be due to environmental factors. It was reasoned that if environment has an effect in changing intelligence scores, then the longer a southern-born Negro child lived in the North, the higher his intelligence test score would be. Therefore Lapidus gave an intelligence test to 517 Harlem Negro boys, all of whom had been born in the South; he then related the scores on the test with the number of years the boys had resided in New York City. It was found that *the longer the southern-born Negro boys had resided in New York City, the higher their scores in the intelligence tests.*

Obviously, if the Negroes were an inferior race, there would have been no correlation between intelligence and number of years residence in New York. Similar experiments have been done by Yates on 619 twelve-year-old Harlem Negro girls, and Klineberg on Negro children in New Orleans, Atlanta, and Nashville. For further details see *Introduction to Psychology* by Boring, Langfield and Weld or any good textbook on Psychology.

Cox also states that the smaller size of the Negroes' brain is an indication of lower intelligence. I'd like to point out that the brains of such men as Anatole France, Walt Whitman, and Steinmetz, the electrical wizard, have been examined and found to be *smaller* than average in size. For example, the brain of Anatole France weighed only about 1100 grams whereas the brain of an average male weighs about 1400 grams. (See *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th edition, Volume IV.)

I'd appreciate your printing this letter in its entirety. I'm not concerned with what Paul Cox or any other person of his calibre believes but I do think that racial prejudice is a rotten, filthy disease which must be wiped out at all costs. Certainly, PLANET STORIES should not serve as a medium for its propagation.

Sincerely,

LELAND SAPIRO

(PLANET STORIES has propagated no prejudices. PS has allowed both sides to air their views. Is that wrong?—Ed.)

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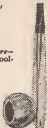
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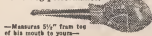
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